TAPPEI
NAGATSUKI

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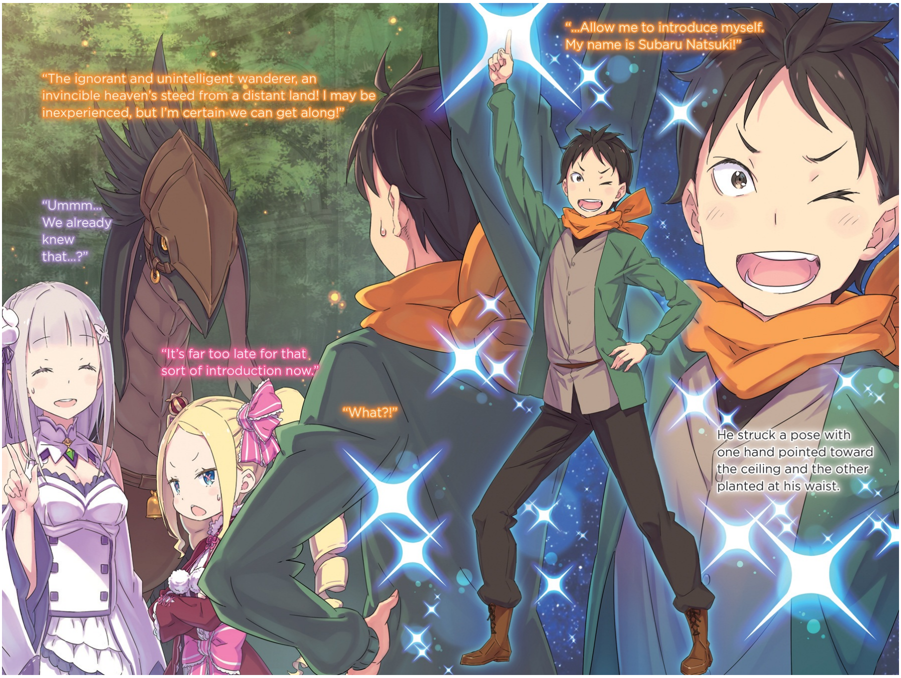
OTSUKA

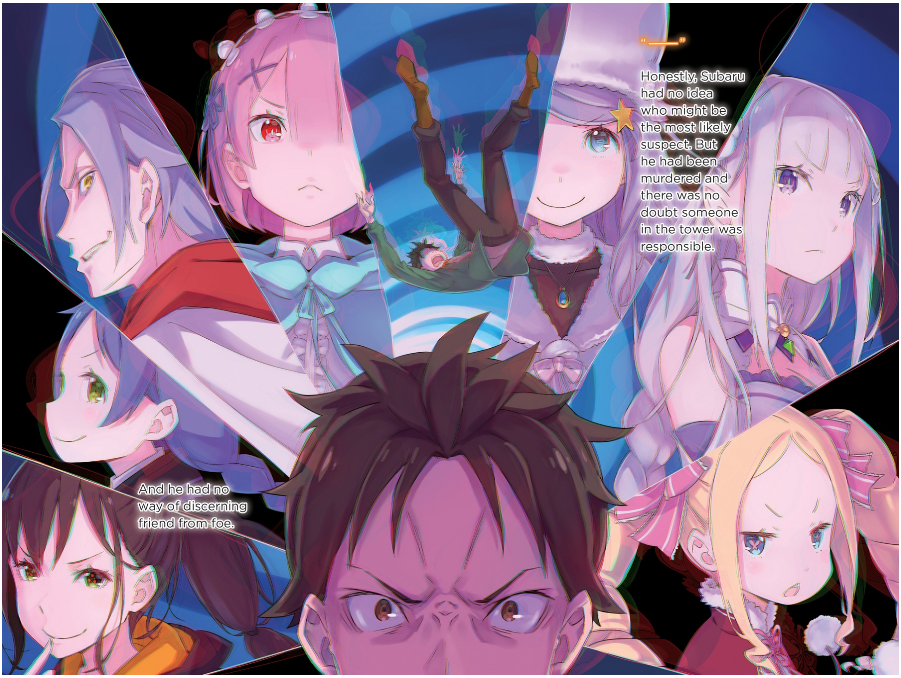
23

Re:ZeRo

-Starting Life in Another World-

Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-

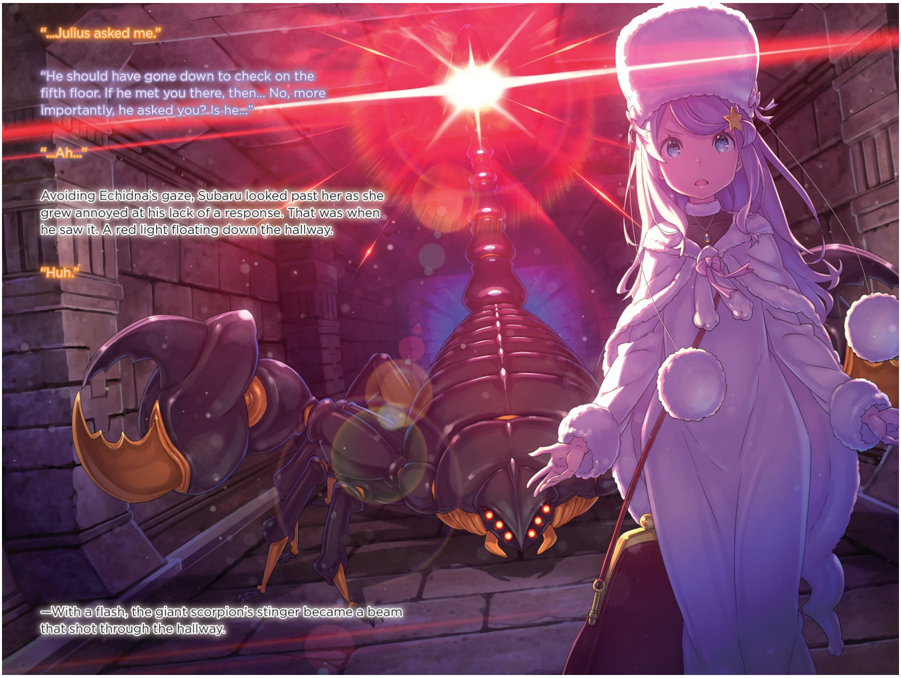

"…Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Subaru Natsuki!"
He struck a pose with one hand pointed toward the ceiling and the other planted at his waist.
"What?!"
"It's far too late for that sort of introduction now."
"Ummm… We already knew that…?"
"The ignorant and unintelligent wanderer, an invincible heaven's steed from a distant land! I may be inexperienced, but I'm certain we can get along!"



"——"

Honestly, Subaru had no idea who might be the most likely suspect. But he had been murdered and there was no doubt someone in the tower was responsible.

And he had no way of discerning friend from foe.



"…Julius asked me."

"He should have gone down to check on the fifth floor. If he met you there, then… No, more importantly, he asked you? Is he…"

"…Ah…"

Avoiding Echidna's gaze, Subaru looked past her as she grew annoyed at his lack of a response. That was when he saw it. A red light floating down the hallway.

"Huh."

—With a flash, the giant scorpion's stinger became a beam that shot through the hallway.

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is
time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.

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Re:ZERO -Life Starts in Another World-

Re:ZeRo

-Starting Life in Another World-

VOLUME 23

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION: SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

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TAPPEI NAGATSUKI

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CHAPTER 1

WALKING OUT OF A CONVENIENCE STORE AND INTO A MYSTERIOUS WORLD

1

Natsuki Subaru was an extremely ordinary boy from Earth, the third planet in the solar system, born to a middle-class family in the nation of Japan. That was all you really needed to sum up his seventeen or so years of life, and if there was any need to add more, the extra sentence "He was a third-year public high school student with a tendency to not show up for class" would be sufficient.

When people find themselves at a fork in the road, like deciding whether to go to college or find a job right away, they usually have to make a decision one way or another. That's something everyone deals with and is a part of what most would call life, but in Subaru's case (some might call it his specialty) he was a bit better than most at running away from things he didn't like. To avoid making that exact sort of decision, his school absences steadily increased until one day, it hit him—he had become a bona fide truant. The kind parents weep over.

"And to top it all off, now I've been summoned to a totally different world. I guess that seals the deal. I'm a high school dropout now. Agh—"

"Subaru?"

As he nodded to himself and tried to come to grips with the situation, a pair of pale white hands grabbed his face. Looking up, he saw they belonged to a beautiful, silver-haired girl.

Personally speaking, he'd give her perfect marks. Ten out of ten for everything from her long silver hair that gleamed like moonlight to those jewel-like amethyst eyes rimmed by fluttering long eyelashes and a face so impossibly beautiful that artists everywhere might snap their pencils out of pure frustration.

And of all the things she could be doing, this beautiful girl was holding Subaru's face from so close he could feel her breath as she curiously peered into his eyes.

She smells super nice.

"Subaru?"

"Y-yerp, that's me. Natsuki Subaru."

Subaru answered with a stiff smile when she called his name again in that oh so charming voice.

My face and voice were probably shaking. And that smile was probably creepy.

But despite his concerns, the beautiful girl in front of him simply nodded.

"Good. Sorry. You just seemed a little strange."

"Strange in what way? Was it my eyes or something?"

"No, not that. You still have your usual glare. I was wondering if you hit your head or something."

"My usual glare?!"

Subaru was just kidding around a little to lighten the mood and was completely taken aback by the unexpected reply. The beautiful girl apologized and stuck out her tongue a bit.

Damn, she's cute. What's with her?

She was almost unbelievably friendly, and the fact that she used the word *usual* made him wonder, but—

"—It is too soon to decide he's safe, Emilia. Why does something feel off, I wonder?"

"…? But his glare is the same as always, I think."

"For the moment, the atrociousness of his glare really doesn't matter. That is not the issue."

"Atrocious?! Come the hell on! Just because…you two are cute…"

Subaru started to raise his voice at the silver-haired beauty who'd called his name and an adorable little girl wearing an extravagant dress who sported curls like a manga character. But of course, he didn't feel comfortable talking so brusquely to two beautiful girls he'd never met before.

"Argh, damn it. What in the world is going on…?"

If the situation was what he imagined, the two of them were probably key people. *Forget villager number one. The silver-haired beauty has to be one of the main heroines and the adorable little girl is probably a helpful mascot character.*

"Ahem."

Subaru decided to make a good first impression and fixed his appearance.

With a cough, he looked back at them and took a step back.

"…Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Natsuki Subaru!" He struck a pose with one hand pointed toward the ceiling and the other planted at his waist. "The ignorant and unintelligent wanderer, an invincible heaven's steed from a distant land! I may be inexperienced, but I’m certain we can get along!”

“——”

Both of them were taken aback by that sonorous introduction. And then the two of them looked at each other in silence for a full ten plus seconds.

“Ummm… We already knew that…?”

“It’s far too late for that sort of introduction now,” the little girl said.

“What?!”

He couldn’t help reacting that way after the introduction he worked so hard to put together was brushed off so casually.

2

Shortly after, the true gravity of the situation became clear.

While Subaru was preoccupied with how badly his introduction had gone, the two beauties had a much more stunning story to share with him.

“So I’ve been with both of you for over a year…?”

“…You really don’t remember anything? Not this tower, or what happened in Pristella…no, not just that, not Ram and the others or Beatrice? …Or me?”

“Umm, yeah. That’s what it looks like…”

The girl’s eyes widened as he sat penitently, making himself as small as he could. He was gutted by an intense guilt as he watched her eyes waver as if hit by a terrible shock.

“No…memories…? That can’t be…”

The little girl was possibly even more stunned by this revelation. As Subaru sat on the edge of a bed woven from vines, he couldn’t help but notice how the girl’s slender fingers trembled as they held onto his sleeve. It made his heart ache.

“———”

But Subaru couldn’t reassure them because he had his hands full dealing with his own immense confusion.

At first, he thought this was the typical “summoned to another world” story beginning to unfold. He was well acquainted with the idea from manga and anime. And in a sense, he wasn’t exactly wrong. This clearly wasn’t the world where he had spent the first seventeen years of his life.

He was basing this on the eccentric outfits and almost inhuman beauty of these two girls.

And if that isn’t enough proof, the defense requests for the horse-sized black lizard to be admitted as further evidence.

—This has to be a different world where these sorts of things are possible.

As he came to this conclusion, Subaru realized there was still a major discrepancy that had to be resolved.

“So I’ve met both of you before and I’m the only one who doesn’t remember…”

That wasn’t one of the usual tropes featured in stories about being summoned to another world and it was bothering Subaru.

Honestly, everything about his current situation came as a surprise. In Subaru’s mind, there was a seamless transition from the moment he left the convenience store to waking up in this unfamiliar world. As far as he could tell, nothing had transpired between those two events.

At the same time, it was hard to imagine these two were just making things up, and he had no idea what they could possibly gain from lying about it.

Plus, if I have to pick between believing a beautiful girl and believing my gut, I'm gonna have to go with the beautiful girl.

"Well, I'm mostly joking, but I gotta admit…my arm definitely wasn't like this when I stepped out of the convenience store."

Subaru pushed up the sleeve on his right arm, then opened and closed his fist.

It seemed noticeably stronger. He noticed calluses on his hand that weren't there before. And…

"And this is pretty nasty…"

Something that almost looked like black blood vessels covered his arm from the elbow to the back of his hand. He could tell right away this was no tattoo. There was something undeniably grotesque about it.

Aside from that, there were white scars all over his body. Fortunately, Subaru didn't mind that very much. He felt a little guilty when he considered what his parents might think, but that was just one more thing to throw on the pile of complicated feelings he felt when it came to his mom and dad.

In any case, he had clearly missed some episodes.

That was enough for him to conclude that their story was credible.

"So, I left the convenience store, got summoned to this other world, made friends with a couple beautiful girls, and then completely lost my memory?"

The rush of words came out too fast, too frantic. Obviously overwhelmed, Subaru did his best to come to terms with his new reality when he noticed the expressions on the girls' faces.

Seeing them looking even more down than him lit a fire in his heart.

"Okay, look! I totally get why you're feeling down, but let's look on the bright side!"

"———"

"As far as I know, this sort of temporary amnesia tends to resolve itself in no time. If this was a movie, everything would be good as new in under two hours! So no need to worry so much!"

"Sorry, I don't really understand what you're saying."

"Huh? For real…?"

Despite his frantic attempt to cheer them up, the beautiful girl only offered a muted response. But as his shoulders slumped, she continued, "But you're still yourself, Subaru… That's a relief."

"Oh. R-really? Hearing you say that makes me feel a little better… Wait, what are you doing?!"

The beauty had just slapped herself without warning. Hard. Her cheeks turned bright red.

"All right, I'm doing better now. I can't sit here and mope around. Not when you're wrestling with all this."

"You're a lot tougher than I would've guessed from that cute face of yours…" Subaru was stunned by her spirit.

"Come on, Beatrice! You too!"

Now she was talking to the little girl frozen next to Subaru.

"I understand how shocked and sad you must feel…but you have to think about who has it worse right now. We have to do something, right?"

"I-I…"

Overwhelmed by the silver-haired girl's sudden question, the little girl couldn't get any words out. But the silver-haired girl just stood there and waited. There was a palpable sense of trust in her eyes.

They shared a bond that was beyond Subaru.

"Subaru…do you need help?"

"…Yeah, if I'm being honest, I'd love some. I have no idea what to do."

"———"

Even though he felt pathetic admitting it, Subaru told the little girl how he was really feeling. When she heard that, her blue eyes opened wide. He could see a peculiar marking in them.

To Subaru, that expression looked almost like the moment when a butterfly spread its wings…

"—Aghhh! You really are the most troublesome contractor!"

The next instant, the little girl's attitude changed dramatically. It was almost as if that butterfly's wings had caused a tornado. With her little arms crossed and her cheeks puffed out, she raised her voice.

"You always, always saddle Betty with the most irritating problems! This better be the last time, or even Betty's patience will wear thin!"

"Uhhh…does that mean…?"

"Since you were honest and asked for help, just this once, we can overlook it… Besides, I suppose that without Betty's help, you are a weakling who would never survive on your own."

"Did you really need to say it like that?!"

Subaru was completely thrown by her shocking transformation. The way she was talking, it almost sounded like he was someone who would get so lonely without her he'd die. What a claim.

Still, it was a relief to see her regain some life.

For now, I'll hold my questions about this contractor business and a *couple other things that need some further explanation.*

"———"

Honestly, Subaru needed more time to wrap his head around the situation.

The confusion was not subsiding. He was finding it difficult to simply accept this new reality and taking all this novel information at face value was nigh impossible.

Even so, he didn't want to believe their kindness was a lie.

"My name's Natsuki Subaru. I don't really know right from left here, but I was probably your friend. I know it's shameless of me, but I'd like to ask you a favor."

Standing back up, Subaru held his finger up toward the ceiling as he introduced himself one more time. And then he held out his hand toward them with a wink.

"Could you tell me your names?"

"———"

The little girl blinked, and for some reason the silver-haired beauty also seemed like she had no idea how to respond. But that only lasted for a second. A moment later, they both slowly smiled.

"My name is Emilia. Just Emilia. Nice to meet you again, Subaru."

"And you should call me the Great Spirit Beatrice. You are Betty's contractor."

And so they all introduced themselves to each other once again.

3

After experiencing the rare second first encounter with Emilia and Beatrice, Subaru promptly—

"What sort of bad joke is this, Barusu?"

—experienced the equivalent of lying down on a bed of nails at breakfast, which was really a briefing to go over the group's recent findings.

Emilia and Beatrice were present, naturally. There were also five other people: one guy and four girls.

This is a pretty unbalanced group.

Based on what Emilia told him, they were apparently all traveling together, comrades working toward the common goal of clearing the tower they were currently inside. Of course, since he had only seen a bit of the interior, Subaru couldn't tell that he was inside a tower.

The group didn't lack for variety, but the one thing they had in common was that they were all attractive.

Kinda makes me feel bad as the only person bringing down the average.

But that wasn't the only or main reason he felt bad. His amnesia was the biggest issue by far.

Emilia took it upon herself to explain the situation as best she could while Beatrice provided helpful additions. The group's reaction was varied.

The first move went to the peach-haired girl—Ram.

"Are you listening to me, Barusu?"

"Yeah, I'm listening. I understand why you might not believe me, but I'm dead serious. Also the way you're saying my name sounds like it's some curse to put out an eye… Are you that sleeping girl's sister?"

"———"

Ram's eyes suddenly grew very scary.

Subaru had brought along an unconscious girl and the black lizard who'd been recuperating in what was unimaginatively being referred to as the green room. The girl had bright blue hair but otherwise looked just like Ram, and apparently part of the reason they'd come to this tower was to end her unnatural slumber.

"I'm sorry that this happened right when we're trying to wake up your sister, but I've kind of got my hands full at the moment. If you've got complaints, can you save them for after I get my memories back?"

"…Do you really expect me to believe your story? You even talk the same as always."

"I'm glad my core, unchanging goodness still shines through. This must be what people mean when they say a person's nature can't be easily changed, so hopefully you and the new me will get along just like before."

Ram stared at Subaru even more dubiously.

He could understand why she'd find this disconcerting, but he couldn't just play a different version of himself, either. If it was hard to tell the difference between current Subaru and old Subaru, then that didn't seem like such a bad thing.

"We can just skip any unnecessary concerns and—whoa?!"

"Master?"

As he was talking to Ram, he felt someone practically breathing in his ear and spun around. Standing there was a woman in a black bikini top and hot pants—

"It's Shaula! Your most beloved student and the star guardian of the Pleiades Watchtower!"

"St-star guardian…? And Master? Did you mean me?"

"Yep!"

Shaula introduced herself with a beaming smile as bright as the sun. Her carefree smile shattered the initial impression he got from her appearance. She seemed like a mature sort of beauty with her bold, skimpy outfit, but her artless behavior was almost child-like. She almost seemed like a puppy that was just happy to have attention.

"But still, you never learn, do you, Master? How many times have you forgotten me, now?"

"Wait, wait, wait! Do I lose my memory every other day or something? Is it a side effect of being summoned to this world?"

Subaru was horrified by Shaula's nonchalant statement. He had somehow managed to accept that he was suffering from amnesia, but if this was something that happened all the time, that was a very different problem. Some kind of endemic disease in this world that he had no resistance to or perhaps an issue with the summoning were both angles that had to be considered.

"This world doesn't seem like that harsh a place to live. How many times have I lost my memory then?"

"C-calm down, Subaru. And Shaula, don't make things more complicated," Beatrice said.

"Bleh. It's not like I'm trying to tease Master. Ah, but if this makes him focus more on me, then that would be nice. Black-magic womaaan!"

Beatrice took Subaru's right hand and tried to put him at ease while Shaula stuck out her tongue, showing she had no intention of taking things seriously. It seemed like her high level of affection for Subaru was the main reason, so he wasn't too bothered by it, but…

"…That's all stuff I built up before I lost my memories."

Shaula's beloved master and the person Emilia and Beatrice held so dear—that wasn't him. Not really. It was a complicated feeling.

"You're really good at causing other people trouble, aren't you, mister?" asked a young girl.

"…Oh? That's an awfully tender look you're giving me. Since my affection levels with everyone have been reset, if you play your cards right and treat me nice, we might end up even closer than before, whoever you might be."

"Hah…good one."

The girl giggled and kicked her swinging legs.

She looked around the same age as Beatrice and wore her dark blue hair in a braid. She had an adorable face with big, round eyes that gleamed impishly.

"I'm Meili, mister. If you didn't forget your sewing specialty along with your other memories, then I hope you'll make me another stuffed animal."

"Oh? If you know about my special skill, then we must've been pretty close. Are you a little-sister character like Beatrice?"

"I suppose she is an assassin who came to kill you and Betty," Beatrice helpfully explains.

"What kind of joke is that?!"

That was pretty dark for a joke, but for some reason, no one was denying it. Even Meili just smiled faintly and waved her hand.

"So Ram, Shaula, and Meili have done their introductions…"

Setting aside the issue of Meili's true nature for a moment, Subaru turned his gaze to the last two members of their party. A beautiful woman with a fox scarf and handsome young man who carried himself with undeniable poise.

Neither of them had commented on his memory loss yet, but he was looking forward to seeing the reaction of the only other guy present. Subaru was feeling a bit bashful surrounded by so many women.

But his hopes were quickly dashed.

"———"

The young man clammed up and put his hand to his mouth. The gesture was almost blood-curdling. It was so bad that even Subaru hesitated to say something thoughtless despite his penchant for purposefully saying the wrong thing at the wrong time.

Subaru even wondered if this guy was the most shaken of them all by this news.

"…I'd like to give him a little bit of time to compose himself. Do you mind?"

In his stead, the girl with a warm-looking scarf spoke up. Despite her feminine appearance, Subaru thought her tone was almost manly.

She gives off a confident tomboy sort of feel.

"Yeah, I guess it's fine. It's a sudden development, after all. I'm sure it was shocking…"

"I'd wager that's not the only reason…"

"Huh, you really do sound like a tomboy."

"…For now, you can just refer to me as Anastasia. Were it not for your dramatic reveal, I had intended to make my own shocking confession this morning."

The girl—Anastasia—rubbed her scarf with a faint smile. Subaru was curious about her supposed confession, but it was doubtful whether he would find it surprising at the moment.

Either way, if they were going to follow Anastasia's suggestion and give the other guy some time to recover, then…

"In that case, let's finish preparing breakfast. Lady Emilia, could I borrow Barusu to carry water?"

"Eh? But his memory still hasn't returned, so it would be better to let him rest…"

"Is that something that gets better with rest? And questions about memory aside, Barusu is technically Lord Roswaal's servant. A bit of memory loss is not enough to excuse slacking off on the job."

"That's a pretty harsh opinion, Miss Ram… Mistress Ram?"

Standing up, Ram brushed off her knees, her gaze sharpening at his response. "…Just Ram. Impertinent as you are, you always left out titles."

Honestly, her suggestion was like she had thrown him a life preserver. Subaru found it suffocating when people were overly concerned about him. And considering the other guy looked like he was going through a personal crisis of sorts, it probably wasn't the worst idea for Subaru to be away for a little while.

"Then I can go instead…"

"Lady Emilia, spoiling him over something as small as getting some water will do him no good."

"But…"

"It's fine. There's a logic to what Ram's saying. Memory aside, my body seems fine, too. And looks like my job in the group is servant or errand boy or something, so I can at least handle fetching some water."

Emilia was trying to talk the prickly Ram down, but she finally let it go when Subaru insisted it would be okay.

"…You aren't some servant, you're my—"

"Your…what? I-is it maybe, um, a lover sort of—"

"No, nothing like that."

"Nothing like that?! Well, that makes sense…"

Subaru had gotten his hopes up and was breathing raggedly through his nose as he asked, but Emilia promptly shot him down.

Appearance-wise, she was *totally* his type, but Emilia was so far out of his league that he couldn't even imagine any romantic relationship.

Memories or not, there's no way she'd ever see me that way.

"Anyway, I'm fine, so take care of that dude. He looks like he'll need it. I'll be counting on you and…Betty."

When Subaru quietly made his request, Emilia quietly nodded. "…Right. I got it. I'll try to talk to him."

Then he noticed that Beatrice had a complicated look on her face as she held his hand.

Seeing him look at her, Betty cleared her throat.

"Subaru, please stop calling Betty that."

"…? Really? Is Beatrice better?"

"…I suppose that will do for now. Betty will take your request."

With that, she let go of his hand and Emilia took the chance to hand him an empty bucket.

"All right then. I'll be back soon. Hold down the fort here, Emilia-chan."

"…Yeah."

For a second, Subaru thought he detected some hesitation in Emilia's response, but he didn't have a chance to ask why as he was on his way out of the room with Ram. Once they'd traveled down the hallway far enough that he couldn't hear their voices anymore, Subaru heaved a big sigh.

"…You sound rather exhausted."

"Well, yeah. I'm kinda pushing myself stupidly hard. I'm not really the sort of person who's great at being careful around others," Subaru said with a shrug.

It had been that way since talking to Emilia and Beatrice, but it hurt to have people feel so clearly let down because of him. This was way beyond just failing to read the mood.

"…Can I ask you what that was all about earlier?"

"You mean Sir Julius? That was quite cruel, Barusu."

"Cruel…?"

Subaru's face puckered up at her cold response, and he wondered what had transpired between him and that guy. And perhaps because he was thinking about that, he was slow to notice that Ram had stopped walking.

"Ram?"

"—Could you please stop this pointless farce already, Barusu?"

Completely taken by surprise, he turned around to look at her. There was a quiet fury in her pink eyes as she brushed back her peach-pink hair.

"I made a point of changing the location for you. Don't make a woman embarrass herself unnecessarily. It's obscene."

"Uh, obscene?"

"This is just another one of your stupid plots, right? Lady Emilia can't keep a secret, but at the very least you should tell me what it is you're planning."

Her arms were crossed as she spoke but there was a certain nuance to her demand, as if what she really meant was that it'd make her life easier to know what was going on if push ever came to shove.

Hearing that, Subaru avoided looking her in the eye as he scratched his head.

"Ummm. Ram, about what you're saying… It's not like I don't get it, but…"

"But what?"

"Sorry, but this isn't an act or something. I don't have any tricks up my sleeve. I genuinely don't remember a thing. And so I can't really live up to whatever you're expecting of me."

"So you're going to be stubborn about it. You always try to shoulder everything yourself, but just this time around, that's a problem. When Rem is involved, you should let me help out."

"No, I'm being serious…"

Her insistent denial left Subaru completely at a loss and he couldn't help but wonder which one of them was really being stubborn.

He could understand not taking his memory loss at face value, but if she was being this insistent, there was nothing he could do.

Also, how exactly is pretending to have amnesia supposed to help us make it to the top of the tower?

"I wouldn't know. But I'm sure you have some secret little plan. So come clean, now. I will keep it a secret."

"I'm tempted by the ring of 'it'll be our little secret' but…"

At this point, Subaru was beyond surprised and was simply exasperated by how completely unfounded Ram's assertions were. And what was all this about his supposed plan? How much was she going to overestimate him—

"Whoa!"

While Subaru struggled to come up with an acceptable answer, he suddenly felt a sharp pull on his collar. He stumbled, dropped the bucket on the floor, and found himself with his back up against the wall. And the person who'd put him there was none other than the slender girl in front of him.

"What are you doing all of a sud—"

"Tell me. If you don't cut it out, I have my own plan."

"—Ngh, are you listening?! I told you I'm not lying!"

"—Just tell me already!!!"

He tried to push her away, but then her furious shout crashed into him, and he froze. His hands went limp. Her cry had caught him by surprise but that wasn't the only reason he stopped flailing. There was something much more important.

"Tell me everything…"

Her voice was wavering badly.

Even though he couldn't remember her, seeing her like this still stunned him.

"…Please, just tell me everything."

"Ram?"

"…Please…"

She leaned her forehead against his chest as she pleaded in a weak voice.

The explosive force from just moments earlier was gone, leaving only heartbreak.

It wasn't a tearful voice. She wasn't that frail. She wasn't grieving. She wouldn't allow herself to be.

But the aimless resentment in her voice tore into Subaru's chest.

"If you forget, then I…then Rem…"

—Rem, her little sister's name.

The girl who was the spitting image of Ram sleeping on the bed in the green room. What had there been between them and Subaru? What sort of relationship had they built together? He couldn't begin to imagine.

But he could tell that Ram was desperately clinging onto something that Subaru had forgotten.

"…I'm sorry."

He apologized as she pressed her head to his chest, not allowing him to see the look on her face.

Was it an apology for forgetting or an apology for not being able to answer her?

It was both. And plenty else.

"______"

Ram didn't say anything else. And Subaru couldn't say anything more.

The only witness to their helplessness was the bucket on the floor.

4

“—Subaru knows just how painful it is to be forgotten, so he would never joke about forgetting someone.”

Having caught his breath, Subaru was just about to return to the green room when he heard someone inside say that.

He couldn't see it, but he could imagine from the tone what sort of expression Emilia had—her beautiful face strained, her eyes filled with trust in «Natsuki Subaru».

It certainly isn't faith in me.

"…Wouldn't tell a joke like that… Yes. For once, Lady Emilia is right."

Apparently also overhearing the same thing, Ram murmured to herself with a scoff. Coming from someone who was supposed to be serving Emilia, that was fairly rude, but considering what had just happened, Subaru hesitated to point that out.

"I'm just grumbling. Forget you heard anything. And don't trouble Lady Emilia or the others by mentioning what happened earlier. And for the sake of my honor, too. If you say anything…"

"What'll happen?"

"…You really don't remember, do you?"

Did she intend to say he would regret it? Maybe he should have cracked a joke.

There was a brief flash of emotion in her eyes when Subaru failed to respond correctly, but it was gone as quickly as it came.

Was not letting me say anything a show of her strength? Or was it the opposite…?

"—Apologies for keeping you waiting. We have returned."

With that, Ram stepped into the room with Subaru in tow, both of them looking perfectly innocent.

It felt like the mood was ever so slightly lighter than before they'd left. He probably had Emilia to thank for that.

That was as good as confirmed when the first to speak when he entered the room was—

"…Sorry for my disgraceful behavior earlier. Could we talk now?" asked Julius.

"S-sure. I'm sorry too for the…ah, no, don't let me interrupt. I'll gladly listen."

"Don't be so formal. Hearing that from you would only make it all quite a bit harder to take in."

The purple-haired man flashed a faint smile as he bowed.

He had been deathly pale after Subaru's confession earlier, but it looked like he had recovered somewhat. But there was also what Ram had said in the hall. When he asked about Julius, she'd said it was cruel. What had she meant by that?

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Julius Juukulius. I am Lady Anastasia's…her knight. You and I are friends…of a sort."

"Gotcha. I hope we can get along… Though you sound kind of unsure."

"As it happens, there is a fair chance we may have had different ideas about the nature of our relationship. I viewed you as a friend, but as for what you thought…"

"Yeah, I can't really say either then."

"…Indeed."

Subaru found that indirect, refined phrasing rather curious.

They had apparently survived a terribly harsh journey to get there, and as the only two guys in the group, they most likely had some sort of connection.

"If I'm being real, you do look like the sort of person I'd snap at the first time we meet face-to-face…"

"Don't worry. You and Julius were *really* close."

Despite Subaru's comment, Emilia put her hand on her hip and gave their friendship her seal of approval.

"Right?" Emilia glanced around, looking for backup.

"That's right." Meili smiled. "You got along just fine, so don't worry. Also, Mr. Knight's problem isn't really that."

"It isn't? Wait, what is *that*…?" Subaru asked.

"—Is *that* related to Lady Anastasia's behavior that's been odd since this morning?" Ram continued where Meili left off.

Hearing that, Subaru looked toward Julius and Anastasia.

Julius averted his eyes and Anastasia smiled vaguely.

"…That is correct, Ms. Ram. Though it unfortunately now comes on top of Subaru's predicament."

"I wasn't really wanting to add more confusion to the mess. But the longer I put this off, the more discord builds. So I'll put my trust in the bonds we've cultivated during our time getting through the dunes."

"…That's a rather grand way of putting it, I suppose."

"Have no fear, Beatrice. We're sisters bound by a not so shallow bond, aren't we? Just like you guessed," Anastasia interjected.

Beatrice's face stiffened as she held onto the hem of Subaru's clothes. Seeing that, he naturally put his hand on hers.

Anastasia continued, "…Your relationship with Natsuki is endearing and ideal. I would've liked to have been able to build something like that with Ana, too, but it didn't work out so well."

"You're talking about Anastasia like she's someone else. That means you…" Emilia trailed off.

"As most of you have surmised, right now, the will that inhabits this body isn't Ana's. She is sleeping within her body. While she lies dormant, her physical form has been left to me, Echidna, to take her place."

"Echidna…?!"

Emilia's eyes widened at Anastasia's revelation. Beatrice's hand also tensed. Subaru could tell that everyone found this shocking.

Anastasia openly admitted that she wasn't actually Anastasia and claimed to be this Echidna person instead. But—

"…I-I see. That's, uh… Umm, it's a big deal…right?"

Naturally, it didn't really mean much to Subaru since he'd lost his memories.

He didn't remember Anastasia to begin with, so even if she dramatically confessed to being someone else entirely, he had no way of really understanding how that was supposed to be significant.

"But from what I've heard, we came to this tower to help that Rem girl who's sleeping and can't wake up and the other people who are sick in another town, right? So…"

"Right now, at the very start of our attempts to explore this tower, our core group is in tatters. Barusu has lost what little memory he had, and Lady Anastasia's consciousness is in an abyss."

"S-so there's no good news…"

Ram's curt conclusion left Subaru at wit's end.

As one of the problems making up their mountain of trouble, he felt bad, but that didn't change the fact that they were in a situation where it was hard for their party to act. *If challenges like this keep piling up, clearing the tower is gonna be—*

Just as Subaru was about to say it was impossible, Emilia clapped her hands and looked around at everyone's face. "I don't blame anyone for feeling down. Really, I want to worry, too. But we can't just get depressed."

"Emilia-chan…"

"We came to this tower carrying the hopes of so many people. Right now, Subaru and Anastasia are not doing great. Like, *really* not doing great. But…" As she paused for a moment, an earnest light appeared in Emilia's purple eyes. "We can't stop moving. I've always been told by a certain someone to never give up."

There was a strength in her voice as she looked at everyone's face in turn, and then finally stopped at Subaru. Entranced by her beautiful gaze, Subaru forgot to breathe.

His chest felt hot. There was so much hope and expectation in her eyes, and his soul was telling him he couldn't let her down.

"Oww! Subaru! Your hand! That hurts!"

"S-sorry about that! …But Emilia-chan is right."

Apologizing for almost crushing Beatrice's dainty hand, Subaru shook his head to clear his thoughts.

Her words reverberated in his mind. Of course he wanted to just sink into the confusion and dismay he felt. But he wasn't alone.

His memories were gone. He couldn't recall a single thing. But if they were willing to stick with him even now…

"Sorry for causing everyone so much trouble by losing my memory. But that doesn't mean everything is over and hopeless. It all depends on your point of view. Maybe I can think of some cutting-edge new ideas now that I'm not bound by the logic of this world. Crisis is another word for opportunity!"

Anastasia—or rather Echidna—smiled awkwardly at this heat-of-the-moment declaration. "…That's another rather optimistic perspective."

"But it is the exact kind of thing Subaru likes to say, I suppose," Beatrice replied.

After Subaru's show of bravado, the heavy mood in the room eased just a bit.

Emilia gently put her hand to her chest.

"Mm-hmm, right. You were always overcoming all sorts of difficult situations. So I'm sure you'll be able to get through this, too."

"There, that's the spirit! As for what I'll work hard doing, that's a problem for future me, but if someone's expecting great things from me, then I'll have to do my best. And there's even a cute girl cheering me on."

"Thanks, Subaru. And thank goodness. You really are still you."

"——"

Emilia let out a sigh of relief, but her words caught him off-guard.

—*You really are still you.*

That obvious sign of relief also put him at ease. It helped him feel confident he hadn't made a mistake.

He could gradually fill the gap between himself «Natsuki Subaru». And if he did that, their awkward and stiff relationship would improve as well.

With a shrug, Julius said, "Memories or not, it is as ever hard to say whether you can tell the difference between decisiveness and recklessness. Is it because you've forgotten how great the barrier is that lies before us that you can say that so easily?"

"Oh yeah? Listen to you. Is this just how you are, Sir J-…no, it's just Julius, isn't it?"

"…I see. As Lady Emilia says, a person's nature does not appear to be controlled by their memories."

"I'm getting an idea what sort of relationship I had with you. I'll be looking forward to seeing how it goes."

Their exchange was a bit too prickly to be called friendly, but not so harsh that it could be considered dangerous. But from how comfortably it fit, Subaru felt confident this was the emotional distance he normally maintained with Julius.

His first impression had been on the money, and it was clear that even when he had all his memories, they hadn't gotten along that well. Whatever connection they'd built up on this journey, it had been a gradual thing.

"Memories are just a trivial thing, then? Indeed… That is correct."

Julius touched his bangs as he said that, and Subaru nodded magnanimously in agreement.

Either way, the awkwardness brought on by Subaru's lack of memory and Anastasia/Echidna's confession seemed to have dissipated.

"But my anxiety is massive. I'll have to get Emilia-chan to help comfort me later."

"? Do you want to lay your head on my lap?"

"Ah, no, sorry. It's maybe a little too soon for that."

He had gotten ahead of himself and meant it as just a joke, but seeing Emilia willing to entertain it, Subaru balked. Against all expectations, he'd been offered a chance to rest his head in her lap and reflexively turned it down. It was possible he would rue that choice for the rest of his life.

"But still, getting offered that by an ultra-gorgeous girl who is exactly my type is just too high a bar…owww!"

"You have a lewd look on your face, Barusu." Ram had a contemptuous look in her eyes when she slapped his cheek. And then, looking entirely unashamed, she turned to Emilia and the others. "If I might interrupt, perhaps we could continue this important discussion while eating? The passage of time is hard to measure in this tower, but it'd be best not to get too out of sync."

"Agreed! I second the motion! Food! Food!"

Shaula had been disinterested through the rest of the discussion, but when she heard Ram's suggestion, she latched on immediately. Subaru was about to make a remark about whether this was the time for her to be so cheerful, but his stomach growled audibly.

And once he thought about it, he couldn't deny the fact that his belly was feeling awfully empty.

"…Breaking news: even without memories, I still get hungry. This has been Natsuki Subaru reporting."

"Heh-heh, Ram is right. Let's eat. We can keep talking while we eat, too."

Subaru felt a bit pathetic, but Emilia just giggled slightly and clapped her hands.

With that, he started getting ready for his first meal (that he could remember) after being summoned to this world.

5

“Basically, I am an artificial spirit who moved together with Ana. The fox scarf that she has on her everywhere she goes—you could call that my real body.”

“I see…but… You *are* a different person than the Echidna we knew, right?” Emilia asked.

“That’s correct. I explained my circumstances to Natsuki…well, Natsuki before he lost his memories.”

Echidna shrugged and Emilia hummed pensively, which was adorable.

The group sat in a circle, finishing breakfast while talking. The subject was a more detailed investigation into the second major problem that had been brought up that morning: Echidna’s situation.

The breakfast consisted of meat jerky, a staple for long trips. If Subaru were being honest, it didn’t exactly taste bad, but it was lacking a little something for a palate used to modern Japanese cooking.

While his mind made note of that, Echidna smiled wryly at Emilia’s reaction.

“Natsuki was more or less the same. I guess the name really is a problem.”

“Ah, sorry if my reaction upset you. Subaru and I had a really horrible experience with another person called Echidna…”

“Running into someone else named Echidna, huh. And that Echidna caused some serious mischief.”

Whatever happened must’ve been real awful if that bad Echidna kept us from getting along with this one.

Emilia nodded.

“Mm-hmm, Echidna really caused us a lot of problems… If we meet her again, I’ll definitely be having a word with her.”

“Please do so for my sake as well. My reputation is suffering quite a bit thanks to her.”

“Okay. But it isn’t just your name that’s surprising. I had no idea Anastasia was a spirit user.”

“To be precise, Ana and I aren’t bound like that. Ana isn’t a spirit user. I’m…more like a friend who is a bit older than her.”

“Hm? Not family?”

Echidna’s eyes widened for a moment when Emilia raised that question. Then she put her finger to her lips in thought.

“Family… Family, huh? …It’s a little bit embarrassing when you put it like that… But it does feel right.”

"Then that's enough, I think. A contract isn't the important part. What matters is that you both care a lot about each other. Right, Beatrice?"

"Wh-why did you…ahem, the expression is a little too gentle, but Betty wouldn't say that your view is wrong."

Beatrice's cheeks flushed slightly as she glanced over at Subaru.

In the green room, he'd heard that they were partners. And sure enough, he could practically feel the trust and that bond from her intense closeness.

Most likely Anastasia and Echidna's connection was something similar.

"She… Echidna is not malicious, and her goal is to return Lady Anastasia's body back to her. I have confirmed that much. And she does not seem to be lying."

"It would have been better if we could just figure out how to do that here in the tower, but an unexpected development occurred. And given that, I decided it was pointless to try to hide it any longer. Though Natsuki and Beatrice already knew about it…"

"Wait, really?!"

Subaru was the most startled by Echidna's latest revelation.

Why did an outsider like him know such privileged information? Of course, he didn't have any way of knowing in his current state.

"I'm begging you, don't look at me like that, Ram…"

"You've kept quite a lot of secrets. How many more are there, I wonder? Perhaps you tucked your memories away on a shelf with the rest of those secrets and just couldn't find them again in such a large jumble?"

"That's a little too much!"

Her voice was calm, but her tongue was razor sharp.

Subaru was faltering under Ram's assault when Beatrice stepped in to back him up.

"Wait. Subaru kept it secret in order to avoid making a commotion. As proof, he did tell Betty. Because Betty is his partner."

"Ohhh? Then does that mean he didn't trust anyone else?" Meili shot back teasingly.

"Can you not add any more kindling? I'd rather not start World War Lolita here…" Subaru sighed.

The reason he'd chosen not to reveal the truth about Echidna before was unclear at the moment, but Beatrice's explanation made sense.

"Ultimately, there's no way to figure out the exact reason right now," Subaru concluded.

"—Not to hound you too much on the subject of losing your memories, but…"

Judging the discussion around Echidna's identity to have settled down, Julius shifted the topic. Finishing his food and dabbing his mouth with a white napkin, he looked at Subaru.

"I would like to talk about your situation further. About memories."

"Look, I get why you want to, but it's not like I'm going to suddenly remember—"

"Not that. It may also relate to recovering your memories, but the crucial information is how you came to lose your memories. More specifically, whether that memory loss is due to the effect of something in the tower."

"It'd be a problem if any of us were to end up in the same situation as Barusu," Ram concluded.

"Indeed." Julius nodded.

Subaru quickly understood what they were after.

"True, that's important for sure. Not to make it too much about me, but it really is a pain in the ass losing your memory."

"You talk as if it were someone else's problem…," Beatrice grumbled.

"Still, though, the whole predicament started with me waking up without my memories, so I don't really have any details to share… How did you end up finding me?"

"That's…you were collapsed in the third-floor archive," Emilia explained.

Third floor was another phrase that didn't really bear much significance to Subaru, but the others looked surprised when they heard it.

"The third floor is one of multiple levels that make up this tower. We are currently on the fourth floor, and we are attempting to reach the first floor, which sits at the top of the tower. We successfully cleared the third floor…thanks to your efforts."

Julius provided a concise and helpful explanation for Subaru, who couldn't really share in the group's surprise.

As for that last part, was that just lip service for me since I don't remember?

"In this situation, I can't really imagine being able to contribute that much…"

"It's true, Subaru. The riddle was like gobbledygook to all of us, but you immediately figured it out by yourself…it was *really* cool."

"Hahaha, thanks… Gobbledygook's not a word you hear much nowadays."

"———"

Subaru scratched his cheek in embarrassment. Emilia fell quiet at that, though. For an instant, he saw her eyes waver with a deep emotion, but he couldn't tell what was the cause.

Either way, he couldn't chase after something as fleeting as a ripple on the water's surface.

"So I collapsed on the third floor, and you carried me into that green room… Also, I heard that place is a healing room, but any chance that my memory loss was actually caused by it?"

"Eh?! I hadn't thought of that, but…" Emilia trailed off uncertainly.

"That's an intriguing possibility, but it seems unlikely. I was in that room for longer than you, so I should have experienced any change first." Apparently, Echidna had been in the green room before him, so she rejected his hypothesis. She gently touched her body—the body she was borrowing. "Of course, my own problem has nothing to do with that room. But to take another tack…has your land dragon in there forgotten about you?"

"Land dragon…ah, that big lizard? It was weirdly friendly with me."

When he had first woken up in the green room, the black lizard—land dragon—had been worried about him as much as Emilia and Beatrice. Apparently, that was his dragon.

"That makes sense why it was acting so familiar. Based on that, it doesn't seem like it's forgotten me…"

"I believe it's safe to say that the cause of the problem is more likely to be the Taygeta archive than that room. Especially since it is an archive filled with those troublesome books of the dead."

"Wait, wait, wait. Taygeta? And books of the dead?"

The sudden burst of new information raised all sorts of questions for Subaru. The name Taygeta rang a bell, but even more than that, *books of the dead* was a clear point of interest.

"Now there's a phrase that'll set any middle school boy's heart aflutter. What is that…?"

"There is no proof yet, but the books in the third-floor archive seem to bear the names of dead people from all around the world. These books of the dead allow readers to experience memories from the lives of the dead," Echidna said.

"That's seriously messed up! There should be a limit to how far fantasy worlds are allowed to go, right?!"

"That incredibly intense sensation of memories being burned into your mind…is not something I would like to experience many times."

Julius looked down. His obvious experience lent a heavy credence to his explanation.

An archive filled with books of the dead that allowed the reader to inhabit the memories of someone who was no longer of this world. It was an absurd place just to imagine, but if that was where Subaru had collapsed…

"So did I get knocked out after reading a book? Did my brain just fry from the overload and that's how I lost my memories?"

Nodding at Subaru's guess, Echidna glanced at Shaula. "We can't rule that out. What do you think, 'Sage'?"

"…Huh? Are you askin' me?"

Even with that implication, though, it was hard to imagine anyone calling Shaula a sage. She seemed like the polar opposite of how a sage should be, sitting cross-legged and shaking her head.

"Ask all you want, my answer's still the same. I don't know anything other than the rules of the tower. Whatever Master did to the tower is on him and totally out of my hands."

"…It's a bit late to ask now, but why is Shaula calling me Master?"

"Don't worry. On that point, your response is the same as before you lost your memories, Barusu. Simply ignoring it and taking advantage of the convenient situation… You really are the worst."

"Say whatever you like, that doesn't make it true!"

Hearing that Shaula's affection for him was maxed out for some unknown reason maxed out Subaru's bewilderment in turn. Ordinarily having such a glamorous woman chasing after him wouldn't have felt so bad, but not understanding why she liked him made him more confused than anything else.

Also there was something slightly off about Shaula's affection. Something fundamentally different from the earnest trust he felt coming from Emilia and Beatrice.

He couldn't say if that was just because of his lack of memory, but…

"Either way, it's not like there is some chronic disease where you just randomly get bouts of amnesia. In terms of external causes, the archive is the most suspicious. Going to investigate it would be an option."

"Agreed. In a situation where so many difficult tasks have been set before us, having as few problems to trouble us as possible would be best. With things as they are now, it's a revelation," Julius said.

"About what?"

"Just how much you supported us."

Subaru was caught off guard by Julius's response. And then he screwed up his face.

Not to hide his embarrassment, but because a genuine albeit awkward smile had slipped out.

You're asking way too much. Relying on Natsuki Subaru of all people is a recipe for doom.

Misfortune never comes alone. He felt deeply apologetic for how much worry his memory loss was causing everyone.

"After we clean up from breakfast, let's go take a look. If my memories are spilled across the floor, I'll just have to pick them up and shove them back in."

"That weird phrasing is really just like you, Subaru," Emilia said.

"The way you say that makes it sound like that isn't really a compliment!"

Emilia smiled just a little at his intentionally light-hearted response. He could feel the mood in the room improving again.

He clenched his fist while telling himself *That's good enough.*

6

Once breakfast was over, the party headed to the Taygeta archive.

Along the way Emilia and Beatrice both held Subaru's hands and refused to let go, but considering he had just inexplicably lost his memory, he reluctantly had to accept.

"But man, holding hands with a little girl on one side and a really cute girl on the other. Feels like a cold rain is going to fall today. Actually, isn't it super lame that I have to be protected?"

"You wouldn't be you if you weren't lame," Emilia said.

"Okay, that was harsh!"

And, after he was saddled with that evaluation, the party took a big staircase in another room, heading up to the next floor. And seeing what awaited them there, Subaru gasped.

"So this is Taygeta… Well, you were right. It's jam-packed with books."

There were shelves as far as the eye could see, and they were all filled with books. It was like a massive sea of information.

Subaru was a fairly voracious reader (of light novels and manga), but he'd never been around this many books before. The national library back in his original world might have been a match, but a simple comparison of the book quantity was pointless, since the archive here served a completely different purpose.

"If these are all books of the dead…and each book covers one person's life, then this is a mind-boggling number. The titles…damn, I can't read them."

Glancing at the spines of the books on the nearest shelf, Subaru realized he couldn't understand the script.

The writing on the spines should have been the titles, but it just looked like wriggling worms to him. Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be any auto-translator function to help him read.

"Which makes it strange that I can talk with everyone… I guess it's just the classic summoned-to-a-fantasy-world trope?"

"Trope?"

"Nothing, just talking to myself. Incidentally, could I read and write in this language before, Emilia-chan?"

Emilia cocked her head, confusedly sounding out what he'd just said.

"Umm, you couldn't at first, but you studied and learned to. So, if you can't read the titles now, then…"

"The results of the studies are all gone, huh… So I really don't have any memories from after the summoning."

"So we've proven that Barusu is nothing but useless baggage here in the archive."

"There's not much love lost in that summary…"

Ram snorted curtly when Subaru slumped over dejectedly.

But she wasn't wrong. If all the studies he had done in this world were gone with his memories, he wouldn't be much help in a library.

"So I'm as good as dead in terms of how useful I am to the party right now… Maybe my book is somewhere in here, then."

"Don't even joke about that… Anyway, where should we start?" Emilia's white finger poked his forehead. Her rebuke nudged him to reconsider his position and he scanned the titles he couldn't read.

"First is the question of what we're looking for… You're probably against us just picking up every book in order, right, Julius?"

"It is certainly not an experience I enjoyed or would recommend to others. Also, I failed to explain it before, but you cannot simply experience the memories of whoever's book you happen to find. Most likely, it will not work unless it's a person the reader was familiar with."

"It's limited to just people you knew? Then I won't be able to read any…"

It was unknown whether the books would care whether he remembered or not, but even before getting to his lack of ability to read the writing, that was a major problem keeping him from trying his hand at the books. And with how many books there were, even if he had his memories, how long would it take to search for the book of a specific person?

"Doesn't seem like there's a catalog to reference here, either. So what, shove all the misses into a pile on the floor somewhere?"

"I wonder. I would wager that handling the books like that would be deemed as disrespectful to the archive and probably break one of the tower's taboos."

Subaru cocked his head at the word Echidna used. "Taboo?"

"Ah, sorry. That was another thing we forgot to mention." Emilia held up a finger. "There are a few things you aren't allowed to do in this tower. Like no leaving the tower until the examinations are all complete and no mistreating the archive."

"I see. So shoving them all in a pile on the floor might violate one… What happens if someone breaks the rules?"

"Oh! Oh! Oh! If that happens, then it's my job!" Shaula raised her hand excitedly at Subaru's question. Her hair swayed, and she punched her palm in front of her almost too ample chest. "If anyone breaks the rules, then the star guardian—that's me—will rock you like a hurricane! I'll transform into a merciless killing machine and hasta la bye-bye to everyone taking the challenge!"

"A merciless killing machine…you?"

Subaru snorted at what had to be a dumb joke.

It was hard to imagine the lively and boisterous Shaula transforming into a cold and merciless terminator. And how much could she even do with those slender arms of hers?

"Or maybe in a fantasy world overflowing with magic I shouldn't feel too confident about that assumption? I don't really have a good feel for the power levels in this world…"

Either way, to avoid breaking the tower's rules, grabbing all the books off the shelves was not a real option. That basically guaranteed that Subaru was not going to be of any use.

As the party naturally settled into that conclusion…

"Subaru, it would be bad if anything like yesterday happened again, so don't do anything reckless," Emilia warned.

"Ugh…fine, I got it. It sucks not being able to do anything, but I'll just trust you all and wait here."

"Will you really? You won't just start wandering around?"

"Why are you so insistent! It's fine! I promised, so that should be enough, right?"

"So you really aren't planning to behave…"

"What does that mean?!"

For some reason, Natsuki Subaru was not at all trusted to just wait and behave himself.

He looked around for some backup, but Julius and Echidna aside, Beatrice and Ram were in complete agreement with Emilia and had no intention of throwing him a lifeline.

After that brief talk, the investigation and exploration of the Taygeta archive was underway. Subaru had nothing to do beside hold his knees and wait for good news.

"Well, now I feel guilty. Almost like I'm pretending to be sick to skip a big test…"

"I don't get that comparison, but I don't think it really fits."

Meili was leaning against a shelf next to Subaru while he watched everyone get to work. Subaru looked up at her playing with her braid and cocked his head.

"Hmm? Are you not going to help everyone out?"

"Nope. I'm not one of your real comrades."

"What do you mean?"

"You heard before, right? I'm a killer… I messed up, so maybe a former killer now. But I was only brought along on this trip to help with one thing. And I did that job already."

"Are those, like, the terms of parole or something? …Former or not, bringing a killer along on a big adventurer is a bold choice."

"…It really is. I wonder what you were thinking."

Meili put her hand to her mouth and giggled, ending the conversation. Subaru shrugged and looked in the other direction. He spotted Shaula waiting, also not making any effort to help out Emilia and the others.

"I get Meili's situation, but what about you? Why are you sitting out?"

"Heh heh heh, 'cause I can't read or write. So it's all gibberish to me."

"How did you get to be called a sage? Did the auto-translator bug out on that word or something? …Hey, wait a minute!"

After unabashedly declaring her uselessness, Shaula sidled up to Subaru, trying to cuddle with his arm before he quickly shook her off. His cheeks burned at the soft feeling that had enveloped his arm.

"Ohhh, how mean, Master."

"I'm not being mean. Cut that crap out. A girl shouldn't… Well, save that for whatever guy you actually fall for…no, scratch that. Even that guy would probably find it really weird, so just stop."

"Blah blah. Again with that stuff about how a woman should be refined? You seriously haven't changed at all, Master."

Shaula pouted and made her dissatisfaction clear. But what she said made Subaru catch his breath a little and look down.

And…

"…Do you think I'm not any different, too?"

He'd been told that in multiple ways in the few hours he had been awake. Being told he hadn't changed was a relief to Subaru, but it was also a curse.

It felt like everyone was playing spot the difference between him and the «Natsuki Subaru» who he didn't know.

"Mmmm, couldn't tell ya."

But Shaula just blew off his worries. Subaru's shoulders fell in disappointment when he heard her unhelpful response.

"You…no, I guess I'm the idiot for asking you."

"Mmm, changed or not, you're still you, so who cares? If you just do what you want, how you want, then I just go along. That's all that matters."

"…Even if that leads to some weird results?"

"Eh! If something weird happens, then I'll just open up a path forward with brute force. You might've forgotten, but that's just how our relationship works."

"———"

He couldn't sense even a whiff of ulterior motive in her frank answer. The moment her true thoughts on the matter hit him, Subaru's eyes opened wide.

And then he looked away from Shaula so she couldn't see his face.

"Mister?"

Only for Meili to see his face, forcing him to swing back the other way just as fast.

"What is it, Master?"

"Gah! Argh!"

With nowhere else to run, Subaru buried his head in his knees to hide. At least that way neither of them would be able to see the look on his face.

He could sense the two of them looking at each other, but he couldn't bring himself to look up.

They shouldn't be able to tell. No, I don't want them to know.

That thoughtless, unreserved answer had been such a huge relief. Shaula's brash attitude was a more eloquent answer than any speeches telling him not to get too worked up about losing his memory.

"You're strange, mister."

"Master's always been strange. But I love that about him, too.

Head still buried in his knees, Subaru couldn't comment on the exchange they were having over his head.

But it felt like the sense of urgency weighing on his mind had lessened, if only a tiny bit.

—It was only a few minutes later when Emilia and the others returned from the archive dejectedly without any finds to report.

7

Feet pounding against the hard floor, Subaru sprinted at full speed down the hallway.

Though not quite running like the wind, his body moved faster than expected. Reaching the end of the hallway, he put his hand against the wall, and after a moment's pause, he let out a shout—

"Hah!!!"

Twisting his whole body, he focused his strength and visualized energy erupting from his palm. The intense feeling running through his right hand told him everything he needed to know. Letting out a deep breath, Subaru nodded.

"Yeah, I haven't been given anything at all…"

In front of him, there was no change at all in the wall where his hand had been, and nothing was different about his hand except that it had gone numb.

He had tried all sorts of patterns of running, leaping, and attacking the wall, but he hadn't noticed any sort of nonsensical power. At best, he had a bit more endurance than he remembered. And his hips seemed more flexible. That was about it.

Like the scars all over his body, those small changes were proof of the year he had forgotten.

He was just a mediocrity who couldn't live up to his parents' expectations, but what he did possess was a strength he'd managed to achieve through some amount of effort on his part.

But it's not the sort of special strength that could be called a divine blessing.

"I even tried those transformation poses."

He had gone through the iconic poses of various ultra-warriors, masked riders, and sailor uniform guardians. At one point, he even tried "pretty-pretty, cure-cure." In the end, he had nothing to show for it.

It was the bog-standard trope of summoned-to-an-alternate-world and rebirth stories, but unfortunately, Subaru hadn't been granted any special cheat abilities by a god.

"And Emilia-chan just gave me a blank look when I said 'open status'…"

It also seemed like the classic game-world status overlay and level concept didn't exist here, so all his experiment achieved was making Emilia and the others stare at him in confusion.

If there was no room for growth in terms of physical power, then he would have liked to pin his hopes on something magical, but…

"If you mean magic, then you can never use it again," Beatrice told him in no unclear terms.

"Never?! Why?! Did I mess around with some taboo spell or something?!"

"You used the base-level magic spell too many times despite countless warnings and destroyed your gate. After that, I suppose you can never use magic again."

"Wait, that happened just using the base-level spell?! How lame is that?!"

…But his partner Beatrice declared he was fundamentally incapable of using magic.

It would have been one thing if he'd traded his future as a mage to cast some grand spell. Hearing that he had effectively destroyed the cork of his magic bottle while casting the lowest-level spell just made him furious at past Subaru.

Memory or not, isn't this the worst possible start for Natsuki Subaru's big otherworldly adventure?

"Blessed with people is I guess the one redeeming quality?"

While going back and forth with the body he'd been born with, he focused on the unease that was filling his mind.

He had put on a tough face in front of the others, but with things settling down, Subaru took stock of the situation and sensed the unstable footing beneath him.

He had lost his memories. There was no doubting that anymore.

There were just too many pieces of evidence that couldn't be ignored, and honestly, he'd started wanting to believe it, too. If he couldn't trust that, how else could he stay there?

This was where he wanted to be. This moment right now and this place right here were all that he had. So he wanted the strength that would allow him to remain.

"In the end, all I can do is rely on bonds that I don't remember. I want to cry."

Natsuki Subaru, always receiving, always consuming. Even when he was in another world.

The clearer it became how seriously Emilia and the others were worried about him, the more he hated himself for taking up a place he hadn't earned.

"———"

He stood alone in the hallway. Everyone else was currently at the party's base on the fourth floor, the room where they'd eaten, in the middle of a discussion. The topic was what to do about Subaru and how to go about taking on the tower's remaining challenges. The focus was whether they should prioritize recovering Subaru's memories or not.

Of course he wanted to get his memories back in the end, but…

"They are *my* memories after all. But there's also the chance that this is connected to the tower's trial."

It was unclear whether the books of the dead were connected to the memory loss, but it seemed obvious that something had disrupted his memories while he was in the tower. In which case, the most likely explanation was one of the books of the dead, and a second possibility of interest was the clearing of the third floor itself. Since it had been Subaru who solved the puzzle, maybe the memory loss was a reaction to that.

"Those sorts of gimmicks are used a lot to create a one-shot, one-kill setting. Having a single overpowered character blow past multiple challenges isn't very interesting, so maybe this is to prevent that…?"

He was deep in manga logic at that point, which was pathetic in a way, but that was the only explanation he could come up with.

Either way, that was why he'd run away from the party's discussion and was by himself putting his hopes in maybe awakening some kind of unknown power.

"The second-floor guardian…"

After clearing the third floor, the party had immediately encountered the fiendish guardian waiting for them on the second floor. The enemy had challenged them to a basic test of strength, but he was apparently some crazy powerful opponent.

Subaru had done kendo in middle school, so he was not exactly a complete amateur at martial arts. But that was a far cry from actual combat. He at least had enough common sense not to mix that up.

"Tch. In which case…"

Frowning, Subaru reached to the back of his hip, pulling out the whip hanging there, and flicked the tip of it against the wall. Then he pulled it back. It cracked violently against his leg.

"Guhhhh! Isn't this the kind of thing your body is supposed to remember even if you don't?! Or was the whip just for show and I never actually knew how to use it all along…?"

Rubbing his shin, Subaru glared tearfully at the whip.

Why is a whip my main weapon anyway? Picking a whip instead of a sword or a gun reeks of a dweeb trying to stand out and look cool.

"But the fact that I can't use it at all… Does that mean I haven't just lost my memories, but experience, too?"

Subaru had heard before that even if someone lost their memory, they would still know how to ride a bike. If that was true, then why did Subaru's body not remember how to use his whip?

Forgetting his memories, making the people he was supposed to be together with worry, losing everything he had built up, and turning into useless baggage was not enough; the scars etched into his body were all that remained of his history, leaving only a faint outline.

It's like I'm a papier-mâché fake.

"Haaah."

Subaru stood up with a sigh.

That word was silly enough to make him burst out laughing.

It's a bit late to realize that. Since when have I ever not been a sham?

"Argh, stop it! Quit being stupid. What's the point of killing my own motivation…"

Giving his cheek a little punch, Subaru sighed and rolled up the whip. He didn't really know how to put it away properly, so it was a massive pain and turned into a mess, but he eventually managed to stow it away at his hip.

I guess the calluses on my palm are from all the work I did learning how to use this whip?

"Moments like this are why you should leave a journal of what you did, dumbass."

Unfairly blaming his past self's lack of planning, Subaru slowly started walking.

I didn't manage to confirm any sort of cheat ability, but that's its own discovery. Now I don't have to rely on something that doesn't exist. Though that way of thinking might be a little too positive.

"Whoops, not this way."

Subaru figured the group had probably about finished up their discussion and started heading back to base but took a wrong turn along the way.

In front of him lay the big staircase leading to the tower's lower floor. It was apparently a six-floor tower, and the fifth and fourth floors were connected by a spiral staircase that was dozens of meters high. The stairs in front of him certainly looked tall enough.

"A spiral staircase means spinning all around, though, so it's a lot more complicated than just pure height might imply. Still, though, that's a weird construction…or maybe not? This *is* a different universe."

The green room was a mysterious place that healed people just by staying inside it. So for a world with that kind of fantasy setting, nitpicking architectural styles didn't make much sense.

Besides, I could say the same for the pyramids in my world.

"I wonder if I tried to do stuff like find common points with my home world before, too?"

That was the start of a maddening line of thought, though.

It almost felt like the gears in his mind got jammed when he lost his memory. Ordinarily, there was no before or after for your own self. Past and present, your sense of self remained relatively constant.

So even here, Natsuki Subaru is…

"…Hm?"

Shaking his head to clear away that feeling, Subaru made a noise. It was just an exhalation without any special meaning. Sensing something unexpected, he unconsciously made a noise.

It was nothing more and nothing less.

"———"

With that simple breath—the world turned upside down.

"Ah?"

His foot left the ground. No, not just his foot. His whole body.

He shot out into open space. He completely lost track of up and down. The sensation of falling filled him.

"Wha—"

The deafening roar of air rushing past filled his ears.

Not comprehending, not understanding, Natsuki Subaru fell. Was falling. Spinning through space and falling down.

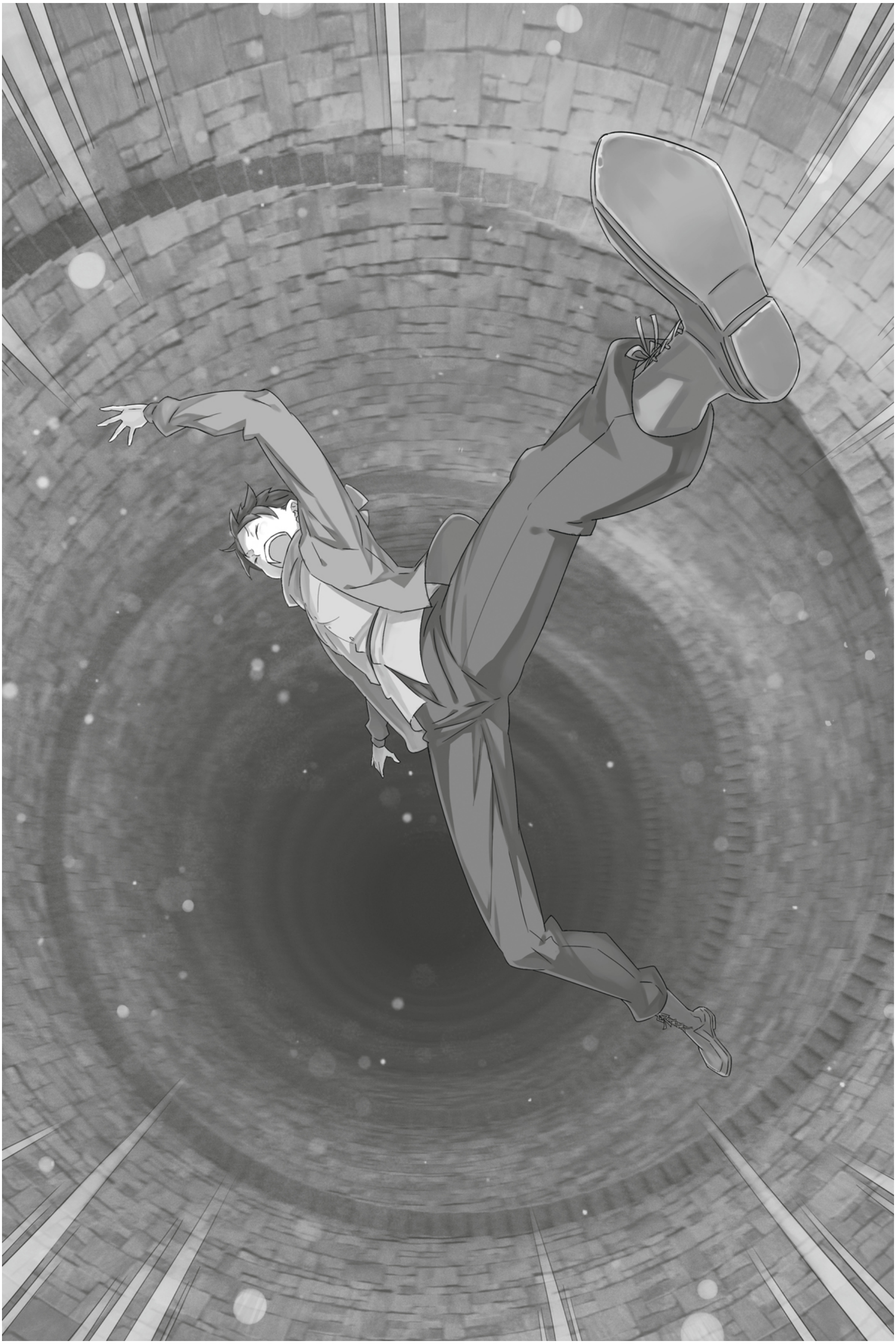
"Wai…wait, wait, wait—"

His world spun and he clawed at the air around him. The flow of time distorted after he left the floor, but finally he realized what had happened to his body.

He was falling. Plummeting. Where? From some place very high to some place very low.

After tumbling off the spiral stairs, he was swallowed up by the yawning darkness filling the tower. He desperately looked around, but the tower's monotonous walls just flew by at high speed.

It almost seemed like the scenery was skipping past him. In reality, he was falling fast, and his vision was instinctively following everything that seemed to be racing upward. Then the nausea hit him. The contents of his stomach spilled out into the air.



"——Ngh."

He couldn't breathe properly, and some vomit lodged in his throat, causing a jolt of pain in the back of his nose accompanied by what felt like all his internal organs shifting around as Subaru lost track of himself.

After his memory, the next thing to go was himself. It was almost funny.

"Gheh."

With a sour, bitter chuckle, Natsuki Subaru lost consciousness.

Lost consciousness, and—

—hit an unmoving object.

8

"—Subaru! Hey Subaru! Are you okay?"

Waking up, the first thing he heard was a silvery voice.

He could feel slender fingers touching his arm and a gentle breath close to his face. Focusing on those sensations, Subaru's consciousness slowly surfaced, and he eventually opened his eyes, which felt so heavy.

—Right in front of him was the face of a terrifyingly beautiful moon fairy.

"No, is that Emilia-chan…?"

"Ahh, Subaru. Thank goodness, You woke up. We were *really* worried."

Hearing that, the fairy—Emilia—breathed a little sigh of relief. His eyes widening at the scene, Subaru frantically looked all around.

He was in the room covered in green vines, lying on a bed of plants. Emilia looked relieved, and beside her was a cute little girl with golden curls.

"You have to be stricter than that, Emilia, or he won't understand how worried we were."

"Right. See, Beatrice is saying so, too. When we couldn't find you, she was all flustered and she almost cried when we found you collapsed."

"I wonder if you had to add unnecessary details!"

Beatrice's face went red, and she indignantly pouted at Emilia's innocent statement.

Watching the two of them, Subaru just cocked his head in serious confusion.

"Eh? Is this some sort of dream?"

"…?"

Emilia and Beatrice both looked confused.

CHAPTER 2

WHO *ARE* YOU?

1

With Emilia and Beatrice looking confused, Subaru was completely lost.

"———"

It wasn't something he would call familiar, not exactly, but he was in a room he recognized.

The walls and floor and even the ceiling were covered in green plants. He was sitting up on a bed of vines. There was a giant lizard behind him, and a girl sleeping on a bed near his.

There was no mistaking the fact that he was inside the Pleiades Watchtower's green room.

"But…wait. Why am I back here?"

Putting his hand to his head, he tried to remember what had happened right before he woke up.

He had left Emilia and the others to their discussion and had gone to check whether he had some kind of cheat ability or not. In the end, the conclusion was that he was powerless as ever, and he'd been thinking about how he was letting them down when—

"After that, I was headed back to the room…and then what?"

The memories after that point were fuzzy. All of a sudden, he was lying on the bed.

And as he tried to probe his vague memories—

"Hey, are you okay Subaru?"

"Whoa! So close, Emilia-chan!"

Emilia's face suddenly leaned in while his defenses were down, and he rolled off the other side of the bed. Emilia's eyes widened at his over-the-top reaction.

"You don't have to be so surprised… If anything, you're the one who surprised us."

"Really…?'"

"Obviously. We went looking when we noticed you were gone and found you collapsed on the ground. It would be strange not to worry after that."

Subaru jolted up at Beatrice's exasperated explanation. "Really? I collapsed again?" He felt himself all over to see if anything felt off, but there was nothing, or at least nothing that could be found by that cursory inspection.

Though there hadn't been any external signs of his memory loss, either, so a wound or scar being present or not didn't really mean much.

"But wiping out twice in such a short time is a pretty bad sign… Or should I be grateful my memory didn't go this time, even if it was only a couple hours?"

"Subaru, before muttering to yourself like that, I wonder if you don't have something to say to us?"

"Something to say…"

While he was looking at his outstretched hands, Beatrice pulled him back to their conversation. Looking up, he saw Emilia and Beatrice, and finally realized.

"R-right. Umm. Sorry. I didn't mean to make you worry. Thanks for helping me again."

"That will do."

"Heh-heh. Our pleasure. But are you really okay? Can we relax?"

"It's fine, it's fine, Emilia-chan. At this rate, you'll never get to rest your heart."

Subaru lowered his head at being saved for the second time in such a short span. But Emilia's brow furrowed at his response.

Her beautiful purple eyes wavered with shock…

"Ummm, about that… You've been acting a little strange ever since you woke up."

"What? Also, that was kind of a vague question. What is it that's bothering you?"

"I mean, you keep calling me Emilia-chan. It's kind of *really* weird hearing you say that."

Emilia spun her finger in her long, silver hair, looking at Subaru nervously. There was a heart-rending loneliness in her eyes that made Subaru gasp.

A girl so defenseless and intimate, so perfectly his type—but there was a deep gulf between how she was acting and what he was feeling.

It's almost like—

"It's not like this is the first time Subaru has pulled some prank, I suppose. More importantly, talk. Why did you go into Taygeta on your own during the night, and why did you collapse there?"

"—Huh? Wait, wait, wait! Um, what? Did I collapse in Taygeta again?"

"…Again?"

Subaru was dumbfounded by Beatrice as she stood there with pink, pouting cheeks.

"Th-that place is seriously scary… Wait, why was I even in there again? It's already such a suspicious place. Talk about being reckless."

Hearing something he couldn't remember doing, Subaru was disturbed by a far too upsetting reality.

Maybe my memories of the moments before I lost consciousness are fuzzy because of something that happened in Taygeta. Or something there messed with my memories.

But as those frantic questions raced through his head, Beatrice raised her voice.

"Hold on. It feels like things are not quite fitting together. Subaru, be precise."

"Hm?"

"Tell us what you are experiencing right now."

Grasping the weight of Beatrice's detailed instructions, Subaru nodded, getting caught up in the moment.

"First, like I said before…when I woke up, I didn't have my memory. Not literally everything, but everything after being summoned into this world—"

"What?! W-w-wait, memory? What do you mean memory?!"

"Eh?"

Beatrice's gravitas shattered at the start of his explanation.

Subaru was thrown off by her unexpected reaction. As Beatrice panicked, Emilia supported her shoulders from behind. But she wasn't calm, either.

She stared at Subaru in confusion, too.

"Memory as in what? What are you saying, Subaru…?"

"Wait, that's the part you're tripping up on? I mean I just…"

He was about to say he had just talked to them about it, but he stopped.

"———"

There was a deep confusion in their eyes. It was definitely not an act. Even he could see that much.

But their reaction being genuine was even scarier.

If it wasn't an act, that meant they'd forgotten the fact that he had amnesia. The steadfast determination to accept that Subaru had forgotten everything was gone.

Could it be I wasn't the only one? Has everyone been losing their memory ever since coming to this tower?

As that terrifying thought surfaced in his mind, Subaru noticed something.

"This exchange…"

It was like déjà vu. Not in a vague sense, but a proper memory.

His first encounter with Emilia and Beatrice—or at least the first he could remember—the contents of this conversation were more or less identical.

Actually, wasn't the way they were watching me here in the green room the same as when I woke up after losing my memory?

"———"

Having thought that far, Subaru gulped.

Glancing at them, he saw there was no change in their attitude. Their baffled gazes were filled with heartfelt concern for «Natsuki Subaru».

That trust, instead of distrust, helped him maintain a measure of composure.

Honestly, my heart is being battered by a massive storm at the moment. But this situation is…

"I've seen this before. It's a precog dream."

Examining the situation in the moment he woke up, that was a reasonable explanation.

If that's what he'd experienced, the moment his consciousness faded—or rather the moment he awoke—would understandably be fuzzy. Dreams were mysterious, slipping through your fingers as they faded.

Maybe this dream is the special power I was given when I was summoned into this world—

"That's a really hit-or-miss, hard-to-use ability…"

But it was certainly powerful if it could be properly harnessed.

Prophetic dreams let people peer into the future. The greater their accuracy, the greater the possibility to use them as a decisive tool in getting out of a hopeless situation.

Though it's dubious how useful this dream really was…

"—Listen, both of you. Try to calm down and hear what I have to say."

With that hypothesis of his ability in mind, Subaru looked at both of them. They looked at each other and then nodded.

Seeing how serious they looked, Subaru hesitated for just a moment before continuing.

"I don't know if you'll believe me, but it seems like I've lost my memories."

2

—Subaru lost his memories when he collapsed in the Taygeta archive.

When they heard his revelation, Emilia's and Beatrice's reactions were basically the same as what he had seen in his predictive dream.

"Ey!"

There was a sharp crack as Emilia slapped her pale cheeks. The pain and shock of that brought a vigor back to her eyes that had been wavering with uncertainty.

"All right."

"I-I…"

Encouraged by Emilia, Beatrice looked straight at Subaru with heartbroken eyes.

And seeing her struggling to speak, he endured the pain searing his heart. He knew the words and the expressions that would follow.

But that was not remotely any sort of relief to him.

It hurt to betray someone's feelings and expectations. It was scary.

No matter how many times it had happened before, even if it was for the same reason, it still felt just as bad.

And this time, he knew Beatrice better than he had the first time. So seeing her eyes trembling anxiously was all the more scary than it had been last time.

"—Argh, sheesh! You really are a helpless contractor!"

Beatrice broke through the shell of anxiety and bewilderment like the butterfly mark in her eyes, escaping the chrysalis of hesitation and spreading her wings.

Seeing that filled Subaru with relief, but it also made him hate himself.

—Is this good enough? Are you happy now, «Natsuki Subaru»?

—Do you want me to build a sandcastle on the foundation of bonds and trust that you made?

"———"

Watching Emilia and Beatrice's kind and heart-rending resolve, Subaru gritted his teeth.

Subaru didn't tell the two of them he had had a dream predicting all of this.

He glossed over the exchange that occurred immediately after he'd woken up and explained away the contradiction of his remembering their names by claiming he simply hadn't forgotten everything.

The question of what he could or couldn't remember came down to him, so the two of them had no reason to doubt what he said. The reason he had done that was to set the stage as close as possible to what he'd seen in the dream so he could test its accuracy.

By aligning reality with the dream, he could see how well the flow of events matched. There was already a difference right from the start, but he hoped that it was still recoverable.

But that wasn't the only reason he hadn't told them about his dream.

"——"

He remembered the world he had experienced in the first dream. No one had remarked about him having any sort of precognitive ability. Not a single one of them.

Considering how powerful it could be, it was hard to believe that they would have hidden that ability from him. They hadn't really had time to line up their stories, and he couldn't think of a reason why they would want to in the first place.

In which case, the natural explanation was that they didn't know about the dreams.

Meaning «Natsuki Subaru» never once told them about the power he had.

"…What were you thinking, «Natsuki Subaru»?"

He was saying his own name like it belonged to some stranger… No, that wasn't quite right.

«Natsuki Subaru» was effectively a stranger to Subaru. He couldn't even begin to guess what he had been thinking, let alone talk to him. There was no way he could even begin to understand him.

Why did «Natsuki Subaru» deceive them and hide the power of his dreams?

A distrust of «Natsuki Subaru» started to take root in Subaru's head.

"You…"

What were you thinking, «Natsuki Subaru»?

3

—The developments afterward largely followed the dream.

Emilia and Beatrice's explanation…

"What sort of bad joke is this, Barusu?"

Ram doubting Subaru's memory loss.

"But still, you never learn, do you, Master? How many times have you forgotten me now?"

Shaula accepting it nonchalantly.

"You're really good at causing other people trouble, aren't you, mister?"

Meili smirking mischievously, as if enjoying the confusion, though he couldn't tell whether she actually cared or not.

"…I'd like to give him a little bit of time to compose himself. Do you mind?"

Julius's shock and Echidna's consideration, suggesting allowing the man some time to recover.

"…Please, just tell me everything."

Accepting that, getting dragged out into the hallway to get water, Ram unloading her innermost thoughts in a massive wave.

Between everyone's reactions when they heard about his amnesia and Ram's quiet grief in the hallway after, Subaru was certain now.

—This dream is disgustingly precise.

It wasn't as if he remembered every word and action they had all gone through. But even so, the intense impression of their reactions all matched.

If there was any problem, then it would have to be…

"You're awfully calm considering the situation, Natsuki."

That was what Echidna said after they finished the introductions and after dropping her own bomb about having overridden Anastasia's consciousness.

"______"

Subaru felt his mouth go dry at her comment.

Her observation was not unreasonable. Subaru couldn't really pull off that level of performance. While everyone else was stunned and flustered and resolving themselves to still struggle against such an unreasonable situation, he just couldn't put his heart into it.

Just like how he couldn't watch a movie a second time and pretend like it was his first time seeing it.

His sympathy for their brave front, the guilt for abandoning them, the distaste he felt toward «Natsuki Subaru», and his own negative emotions all mixed together and grew.

As a result, it wasn't strange to be suspicious of Subaru's underwhelming reaction. However—

"That's a new one. I was always the type of kid who got comments on his report card about not being calm enough."

"…It's weird that you are the least disoriented when it was you who lost your memories. It's only us getting worked up about trying to do something to recover them."

"Maybe it's like how some people can stay coolheaded because everyone else around them is on edge. It may not look it, but I'm pretty scared. Don't worry about that."

"That's not exactly a relief…"

Emilia broke in with a wry smile as Subaru feigned calm while responding to Echidna. But compared to last time, something about the mood was off.

Most likely it was because he couldn't perfectly recreate what he had seen in the dream. He had tried to recreate it as best he could, but there were differences from minor lapses in memory.

Before I blow this trying to recreate my performance from before—

"After we clean up breakfast, let's go take a look. If my memories are spilled across the floor, I'll have to pick them up and shove them back in."

Following the same flow as last time, he nudged them all toward Taygeta.

And—

"Bwehehehe."

In Taygeta, Shaula was next to Subaru with a carefree look on her face.

If she stood up straight and managed a slightly more elegant expression, she could entrance any number of men, but instead she was provocatively snuggling up against Subaru with a slovenly look on her face.

Pushing her forehead away with his palm, Subaru watched Emilia and the others examining the bookshelves. The investigation he knew wouldn't have any results was going on in the background.

"This is really frustrating…"

"Hmm? What's up, Master? If something's bothering you, I'll listen! Not that I have any useful advice, but still!"

"Your decisiveness is so innocent and refreshing!"

"Heehee, praise me more. Just rely on me more and more and slowly sink into my clutches."

Subaru had no idea how talking with him made her so happy, but she was overjoyed even by a cold response from him. And with how he was feeling at the moment, that level of distance was a bit—or maybe very—comfortable.

When he decided to follow the track of his prophetic dream, guilt toward Emilia and the others tormented him. The decision to deceive them when they were so sincere and earnest was nothing short of painful.

Which made Shaula, who was so airheaded and treated him the same whether he had his memories or not, all the more of a relief.

In the same sense of appreciating the distance he had with her, he was also grateful for Meili, who was again not taking part in the search. She grabbed Shaula's long ponytail and pulled it.

"Come on now, don't bother mister. You're getting too excited."

"Owowow! What are you doing, number two?!"

Twisting her head to get her ponytail back, Shaula glared at Meili. Meili had a mature look in her eyes as she put her finger to her lips.

"I mean I don't want them to get mad. I have to watch out and make sure the half-naked lady doesn't do anything."

"Grrrrr! Pissing me off! Say something, Master!"

"Shaula, this is a restraining order. Don't get within three feet of me. It's scary."

"You big meanie!"

Shaula made a big show of pretending to burst into tears and turned away from Subaru. He just scratched his cheek at the sight of her hiding under her cloak, and then he looked over at Meili who was holding her hands behind her back.

"Thanks for the assist… Though it feels a little weird thanking a hired killer for something like that."

"It's fine. I'm sort of retired from that now anyway, and now I'm just getting used by you all. Be sure to use me well, just like my demon beasties."

"———"

It didn't sound like there was an ulterior motive or malice in what she said.

Meili didn't seem particularly eager to blame them. She just said it as if it was natural. Was it just because the values in this world were that fundamentally different from Subaru's world?

To his eyes, she was still just a young girl, which made it hard to bear.

"Mister?"

"I don't really like that way of putting it. Don't say it like that. We're relying on you. Not using you."

"…Hmmm."

For a moment, her eyes narrowed at what he said, and then she looked down meaningfully. But judging it to be because of awkwardness instead of being unhappy with what he said, Subaru felt a little relief.

Even in a world with different values and a different common sense, that doesn't mean we can't understand each other.

He had a little flash of hope from her reaction.

"…You really don't remember anything, do you, mister?"

"Huh? Yeah, unfortunately. What, did I make some important promise or something?"

"…No, but if Petra heard that she might cry."

"Ugh…that's another name I don't remember."

Seeing Subaru tense at the unfamiliar name, Meili giggled.

"Petra is a girl who loves you, mister. She was really worried when seeing you off on this trip. I can hear her saying 'I knew it' now."

"Curse you, past me. How could you be so careless…!"

How many more times am I going to have follow in the footsteps of «Natsuki Subaru»?

"—When it comes to the past you being careless, I definitely agree."

Meili stretched her back as she agreed.

Is that just me imagining it or does that sound like what she really thinks?

Either way, before he could check, Emilia and the others came back.

There really were no clues. The only result was more proof of the accuracy of the prediction in his dream.

4

Following the fruitless investigation of Taygeta, Emilia and the rest returned to the base to start discussing things.

A meeting to review their plan for how to proceed with trying to clear the tower—a meeting that Subaru hadn't joined last time because he thought it would be more difficult to cover the topic with him there and because he'd wanted to check if he had gotten any cheat powers.

This is basically the limit based on what I saw in my dream, so everything past here is uncharted territory. There's not really any room to doubt the accuracy of the dream's predictions.

The only problem was he couldn't think of an effective way to use the dream's predictions.

"I guess it is valuable to confirm I can predict the future?"

That was useful information, but only insofar as the Subaru who had lost his memories was concerned. Before he lost his memories, he was presumably using the ability to some effect. The trust that Emilia, Beatrice, and the rest of his comrades placed in him was presumably earned using that power.

But the crucial point of knowing what triggered it was unclear, and even with that, it was hard to take advantage of prophetic dreams. Whether he just needed to go to sleep like normal or if there was some special condition needed in order to activate the ability was a mystery.

The dream was the only special ability he had at the moment, so he wanted to figure out the requirements for it.

"I also need to figure out why I woke up when I did and what happens next."

In the end, his memories of the moments right around waking up were still fuzzy. There was the planning session going on without him, and his exploration of cheat abilities, and his conclusion that he didn't have any special power.

And then after that, he had woken up and realized he had had a dream predicting the future, but…

"If I hadn't woken up, how far could I have gone in the dream?"

For example, if he hadn't noticed anything in his dream and had just gone to sleep, how would the prophetic dream handle that? Would he wake up after one day passed in the dream or would things continue with him having a dream in a dream?

"That's a little scary. We'll end up in Butterfly Dream territory at this rate."

The Butterfly Dream was a story about the fuzzy line between dreams and reality where a man dreamed he was a butterfly, but then wondered if he was really a human dreaming or actually just a butterfly dreaming it was a man that then woke up.

Thoughts that went in circles and questions without answers. It was a nightmarish labyrinth of suffocating self-doubt, questioning whether he really existed or not.

In Subaru's case, had he really woken up from the dream and reached reality, or was the reality he thought he was currently experiencing just inside a dream?

I don't want to imagine Emilia and Beatrice shaking me awake inside that green room to start over again, but…

"…I just have to go beyond where the dream ended to make sure that doesn't happen. If I can do that, then it should be okay to tell them all about my dream."

It seemed like the «Natsuki Subaru» who had all his memories never told the others about his dreams, but the current Subaru was desperate for any sort of change in the situation.

He didn't want to be too late because he was scared of an unknown future.

"I've decided. I'll tell everyone about the dream."

With that resolve, Subaru headed back to the base where Emilia and the others were talking.

Honestly, whether I can even explain this dream ability feels like a dice roll. The trigger is unclear, and I'll need their help in order to even prove it. But if we can figure it out, I'm sure it will be a powerful tool. It might even end up being a key to clearing this tower.

So with that thought—

"—About Natsuki… Don't you think it is a little too dangerous to have him accompany us?"

"———"

Just outside the room that was their base, Subaru held his breath when he heard that voice.

When he heard Echidna's levelheaded tone, he suddenly hugged the wall and hesitated to speak up. Missing his opening, he stood there listening instead as the conversation continued.

"What do you mean by dangerous, Echidna?"

"Do you really need that spelled out for you? Given his claim that he lost his memories—and based on his behavior, it does seem true—but with him being that unreliable, you would still insist on bringing him along?"

"Is it safe to assume you are saying that less out of concern for Barusu's safety and more out of a belief he would weigh us down? If so, I am in agreement."

Ram's cold, stiff voice accompanied Echidna's systematic statement.

"Ram!" Emilia raised her voice. "You too?"

"I merely stated an objective truth. Or do you really believe that you are capable of working with Barusu just the same as yesterday now that he doesn't have his memories, Lady Emilia?"

"That's…"

"I acknowledge that Barusu is not a bad person. But if you asked me whether I could trust a Barusu who is a blank sheet, then I would say no… There is no reason to."

It was cold logic, but at the very last bit, it sounded like Ram was holding back a bitter taste.

Her reason for not trusting Subaru—an inability to trust Subaru himself after he lost everything as opposed to just not believing what he said—was entirely reasonable.

"I believe in Subaru. Beatrice does, too. Please, everyone, just have some faith in him."

"…Lady Emilia, Echidna and Ms. Ram are not doubting him. They are merely pointing out that relying on him right now raises too many uncertainties." Julius's reasoned response countered Emilia's plea.

"The way you are saying that, you agree with that spirit then, I suppose?"

But with Beatrice determined to be Subaru's ally no matter what, her response darkened the mood in the room.

Suddenly, a terrible tension filled the air and a bead of sweat formed on Subaru's brow.

I need to speak up and break this ominous feeling.

But even as the thought crossed his mind, his legs refused to move.

"Now, now, not much point in getting all heated up about it, right? Not like Master would be happy about you duking it out here over this."

"I don't think it's really gone that far, but you're not wrong…"

Shaula and Meili, who steadfastly maintained their unchanging positions as bystanders, spoke up. Meili hemmed and hawed a bit, taking her time before continuing.

"Why not just try asking mister directly? Ask if it's okay to trust him."

"—Ngh."

Subaru gritted his teeth at the venom laced in those words. And then with a calm that surprised him, he pulled himself off the wall and carefully walked away from the room without any audible footsteps.

As he got further and further, his steps grew faster until he broke into a run…

"Damn it!"

Pushing his head against the wall he ran into, his body shuddered from the swell of emotions.

The direction the discussion had taken without him had been more of a shock than he'd imagined.

He hadn't been so self-absorbed to assume he'd won their absolute trust. If anything, he had been assuming that wasn't the case.

…But he'd thought that he had managed to convince them to believe in him, even if only a little.

"______"

Because Emilia and Beatrice had been so kind, so considerate of him.

Even as he felt guilty about that, he'd haughtily assumed that of course they would believe him. Without any doubt, he had believed they would accept him as a comrade even though he couldn't remember anything.

He finally realized that he hadn't been looking at himself objectively.

What sandcastle of trust? Acting like you understand when you don't know anything. Trying to claim what «Natsuki Subaru» earned for yourself.

"Looks like they wouldn't believe me even if I told them about the dream…"

The fact that they believed his claim about memory loss was a testament to their good nature. But it was conceited to expect them to just accept anything and everything that came out of his mouth.

"It was hopeless from the start…"

He'd messed up. Subaru had messed up.

If I tell them about the dream now, I don't have any evidence I can show to get them to believe me. But I don't have the acting chops to go back to them and keep pretending like I don't know anything, either.

I can't take the place of the «Natsuki Subaru» they've been looking for.

"______"

As he realized what he was lacking, the view in front of him suddenly cleared.

He had reached the spiral stairs connecting the fourth and fifth floors—the massive empty space that filled a large portion of the thousand-foot-tall observation tower.

"Spiral stairs…"

Subaru's voice cracked as he opened his eyes wide.

Counting the dream, this is the third time. In the dream and in reality, they gave me a brief tour around the inside of the tower.

So it wasn't wrong that the scene was familiar. But…

"What…? This is different… A weird feeling…"

An eerie feeling, like all the hair on his body was standing on end.

His blood ran cold and there was a ringing in his ears that seemed to grow. His heart started racing and his breathing got rougher and, for some reason, his knees quivered.

Subaru realized something was wrong when his teeth started clattering.

Not because of a sudden drop in temperature or a change in air pressure or anything external like that. This change, this disturbance was something caused by his own body. Or rather the effect on his body was caused by something in his head…or something even deeper than that…

"…Ah…"

There was a light shock and Subaru took a step forward.

—No, it was not a step, because a step required ground to step on.

His foot moved forward into open space.

So…

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaah?!"

Falling, falling, falling.

A floating sensation took over his body. Up and down flipped, and a rushing gale roared in his ears.

He recognized this situation. He was tumbling. *No, there was an impact. Something hit my back.*

Someone pushed me—

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Screaming, Subaru desperately reached out, searching for something to grab.

His hands found nothing. He was spinning so fast he couldn't see anything around him.

A desperate nausea welled up from inside, turning into vomit that spilled out of his throat. And in that moment, Subaru caught a glimpse through the veil of fuzzy memories.

Right, right, that's right. This isn't the first time.

Right before he had woken up from his prophetic dream, Subaru had experienced the same thing. And in the shock of it, he had passed out, and before he realized it, he had woken up in the green room. *In which case, this is…*

"—Gah."

The next instant,

there was a shattering sound and a shock like a thunderclap hammered the right half of his body, sending Subaru's naive thought into the ether. And what came next was incomparably horrific pain.

"Gaaaaaaagh!!!"

Glancing over, he saw his right arm bent backward at the elbow and white bones sticking out of his flesh. He had smashed into something, but the momentum continued carrying him downward and he was still falling, slamming into the spiral staircase over and over.

“Gah! Guh! Gahhh!”

Covered in blood, the sustained momentum of his fall and spinning slammed him into the tower again and again.

His forehead split and he felt something that should be inside slipping outside. For just a split second, his consciousness grew faint and almost faded, but the continuous barrage of pain refused to let him go. It was a recurring hell.

"Ahhhh! Gyaaaaah!"

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts.

The pain, torment, nausea, burning all ground Natsuki Subaru into dust.

His arms, legs, face were all shattered, crushed, broken by the stone stairs he slammed into, until he lost his human form and became something not human. Shaped into something that was not Natsuki Subaru.

He was ceasing to be Natsuki Subaru. He lost his memory, his form. What about this lump of flesh, this sack of blood defined Natsuki Subaru?

"—Memories make the man."

Subaru's mind was swallowed up by pain and loss when he suddenly heard that voice.

Who said something that stupid? Who's talking shit like they understand what's happening here?

But there is something to that. Memories make the man. It's got a good ring to it.

In which case, who am I, a guy who lost his memories and failed at his own life?

"Fghn."

With a bloody noise, his throat was crushed, too.

By the time he reached the ground far, far below, Natsuki Subaru was broken into pieces.

He didn't wake up from the dream. Natsuki Subaru screwed up. The papier-mâché crumbled.

—*Who* are *you?*

After the terrible pain and all of the blood spilled, Natsuki Subaru's existence completely and totally shattered.

5

The intermittent pain and fierce burning completely overwrote his existence.

Every piece that formed his body had been crushed, broken, and smashed, and the pain of it all was seared into his brain, gnawing away on his nerves, tearing at his soul.

Pain ruled his world.

There was just pain. Pain and nothing else. The world was only pain. Until even the thought that the world was only pain was overwritten by more pain.

Unease, confusion, nervousness, sadness, rage, despair, they all meant nothing in the face of pain.

They had no value. No value at all.

Thought, action, deliberation, opinion, hope, memory, they were all equally worthless.

So what was the point of feeling bad about losing something worthless?

There was nothing except pain without end. The world was pain.

And then that unending pain suddenly relinquished its hold of him…

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!!”

He awoke with a scream.

He just screamed, forgetting that his throat had been crushed and how he had drowned in the blood that had filled it.

“Ahhhhhhh! Arghhhhhhhh!”

He flailed as he screamed, trying to protect himself from being destroyed by the spiral staircase. He tried to protect his broken right arm and his mushy body when he realized something. His arms and legs—they could move.

They moved, but he lost his balance, and experiencing a falling sensation again, he hit the ground. He writhed around on the gnarled floor.

With a cough, he vomited, clearing his throat. What flowed from his mouth was yellow stomach acid, not blood. The sour, bitter taste and scent coated his mouth, and he started coughing uncontrollably.

“Ugh, guh! Gah! Ghah! Geh!”

Furiously wiping the tears and snot from his face, he weakly banged his forehead against the floor again and again. After repeating that process, breathing raggedly, he noticed it.

The searing pain that had mercilessly smothered his body was gone.

"—Ah."

And while shuddering at the pain that had suddenly disappeared, he finally noticed another thing.

As he was cowering on the ground, someone was gently rubbing his back.

"Calmed down?"

Spinning around, through the tears still filling his eyes, he saw the face of the person soothing him. Even through that fuzzy haze, she was still clearly a beautiful girl, with silver hair and purple eyes. Seeing her there, brow furrowed in concern for him, he gulped.

Someone had touched his back. Just like then, before the pain had come for him.

—I have to get away. Pain. Pain is coming.

"Suba—"

"Waaaaaaah!!!"

Just as she started to speak, Subaru violently brushed away the hand on his back and fell over.

My back. My back. Someone touched my back. That moment, right before I fell. Someone. Someone touched it. My back. Not my back. Don't let anyone touch it. Never again. Not that again.

"Eep."

He could feel the hairs on his back standing on end as he scooted backward. Not even standing up, he tried to distance himself from the girl who had been rubbing his back. Then his body hit something behind him.

Looking behind him, his eyes met something hard.

"———"

A big black body looked at Subaru with yellow eyes as he cowered on the ground.

The sharp, reptilian glint in those eyes and the row of sharp teeth in its mouth caused Subaru's terror to explode.

"Subaru! I wonder if you could calm dow—agh!"

"Beatrice!"

The moment his fear took over, Subaru violently shook off the light touch that was clinging to him. Tumbling down after he flung it away, there was a shout and someone rushing over.

Subaru didn't have the mental capacity to look at what was happening as he burst out of the room, crawling on all fours. Pushing his trembling legs, his shoulder slammed into the wall. The sharp impact and pain threw a red veil over his consciousness.

It was pain. He had to run away from all the pain.

"Hah, hieee, arghhh!"

Staggering, his breath giving out, drooling, he ran down the hall like his life depended on it.

His face was hot, and his heart felt like it would burst. It was almost like his blood was flowing backward through every vein in his body.

Run, just run, before it catches up. Before death catches me.

He could hear death's footsteps slowly catching up. It was chasing, so he fled in desperation. He ran and ran and ran. Running without thought.

Even though he had suffered so much, endured so much pain, even though he should have died. Even though he should have been dead, death was still chasing him.

Why won't it end? If I have to suffer like this, then I would be better off—

"Ahhhh…"

It almost felt like drowning.

Even though he was above ground and there was no water anywhere, it felt like he was struggling to reach the water's surface.

Drowning. Like a drowning person desperately flailing their legs, trying to reach the surface, flailing, flailing, kicking, kicking, kicking…

Finding a stairway, he stepped onto it, getting down onto all fours as he mindlessly crawled upward.

Since Subaru was not really drowning, heading upward was not going to save him. But he was flailing pathetically and badly.

He was desperate. Desperately kicking, and in return for his misguided effort…

"Why the hell did you come here so early in the morning? Hey."

"———"

Sensing a terrifyingly large presence, Subaru's legs stopped.

No, it was not just his legs that stopped. His ragged breathing, the infuriating sound of his heart beating in his ears, his knees trembling in fear and exhaustion, every single one of his biological processes had been completely halted.

A space opened before him, a white world, and a being far too powerful stood in the very center.

What is this? Who is that? What is that thing cloaked in such an inhuman aura?

"—Ah."

"You came alone? You, some small fry, by yourself? One person ain't gonna do. Person? Small fry? Anyway, one ain't enough. Come back with that hotty and the babes from yesterday. Hey, you listenin'? I'm talkin' to you." Whatever it was, it unleashed a merciless barrage of words at Subaru before he could register what was going on.

Pummeled by that violent tirade, all of Subaru's vital functions started working again. And he understood.

In his terror and flight, he had stepped foot into a place he absolutely should not be.

—*This is a ferocious beast's lair.*

"Hey, don't ignore me."

Before he realized it, the figure's face was close enough to feel his breath.

Long red hair, a black eye patch over his left eye, his kimono hanging sloppily off his right shoulder and a white sarashi around his waist, and for some reason two slender wooden sticks in his hand.

And to Subaru, the tips of those entirely unremarkable blunt sticks appeared to be death.

"Eep."

"Hey, you aren't gonna cry, are you? Squealin' like a little bitch? Get in a fight with your little friends down there or somethin'? Lose an argument and start bawlin'?"

The man's cheeks warped at the sight of Subaru freezing when someone else noticed his terror.

"What a hopeless guy," the man said, scratching his head in disbelief. "Dumbass. Don't get the wrong idea, asshole."

With a visage like a ferocious shark hungry for blood, the man jabbed Subaru's chest with the stick.

The tip slipped between his ribs where it tickled the organs that were supposed to be protected by his rib cage with a mocking gentleness, with a sympathetic rawness.

Just that was enough to wrack his body with a pain so terrible he coughed up blood.

"Gh-gaaaaaa?!"

"What are you runnin' for? And of all the places you could've gone, you ran to me? What a joke. I'm not your guardian or your friend or nothing. You chose the people you wanted to mob up with. You wanna die?"

"Gh! Gahh! Argh! Guhhh!"

The man toyed with Subaru's organs like an artist even while venting his irritation. And that frighteningly precise and deft manipulation betrayed the man's absurd genius.

—*This is someone who should never be crossed.*

This was what could be accomplished by a person blessed with a genius for violence. A being created to torture others, the pinnacle of barbarity, an incarnation of violence.

—*No, this guy, this place—it's all too far outside my understanding.*

"Get lost, small fry."

The man losing interest, the next moment the feeling of the stick probing his organs disappeared. And then he wildly kicked Subaru with his long leg, sending him flying backward.

As his feet left the floor, Subaru realized he had missed his footing on the stairs. The stairs.

—Going to go tumbling down again?

"Nooooooooooo!"

Provoked by the trauma of falling down the stairs again, he immediately grabbed the floor.

There was a twisted noise as the fingernails on his right hand that tried to grab the floor tore out. Blood spattered and a new, fresh pain seared into his brain. But even so, he managed to control his fall. That was important.

"Gh, guhhh…"

Enduring the pain of his nails being ripped out, holding his bleeding hand, he made his escape. Though it was too slow to be much of an escape. Leaning his shoulder against the wall, he dragged his legs as he fled the violence.

He wanted to get as far away as fast as possible. Somewhere along the way, he was in the middle of a long, long staircase. Wildly setting his sights on somewhere away from everyone, he had ended up in an absurd place.

—No, when it comes to being an absurd place, this whole world is no different.

"Ow… It hurts, it hurts…"

Why am I in a place like this? Why am I in this world?

Even though he had been broken into pieces, even though he had been destroyed, even though it should have all been over.

Was that searing pain just a dream? Or a hallucination? It would be nice if that were true.

"A dream…"

That was what he'd imagined the mysterious thing that had happened to his body was.

Because seeing scenes he had already seen, interacting with people he had interacted with before, having conversations he remembered already having, events he had already been through, that was something too much for him to handle.

So in order to make sense of what happened, to explain it to himself, he had envisioned it as a prophetic dream.

And somewhere in the back of his mind, he'd seized on it as vaguely being someone else's problem, like a fire on the far shore. Not knowing that the price for that shallow, impudent interpretation was terrible suffering.

"———"

All of a sudden, he found himself crouching down.

Sitting on the stairs, he leaned against the wall, staring listlessly at the red blood dripping from his fingers.

Futility, loss, despair, and negativity all swirled in his head.

"Why…?"

Just a few hours ago, he had been carefree and comfortable, living out a bored, normal life.

There was no danger, and nothing to worry about other than his aimless future. No one threatened him. It was just a lukewarm life without anything of note.

—I was in a place where all I had to do was avoid my parents' eyes.

Is this what I get for doing that? For causing them so much trouble? For always disappointing them? For not being a good son? Is that why I was thrown into this hell where I have to experience excruciating pain but can't die?

If I was going to suffer this, then I should have been more…

"…I should've just said, 'I'll be back soon.'"

His was a life filled with regrets, and that was the first one that came to mind.

When he had left the house, his mom had said good-bye.

And I didn't answer her. Why? …Because I hadn't washed the mug I left in the sink.

"Guh…"

I didn't wash the mug. I had some hot chocolate, but it was too much hassle to wash off the brown film on the mug. If I answered her, if a conversation had started from that, she might have told me to wash the mug. So I didn't respond. Because I just didn't want to wash a mug. Because of that, I ignored my mom.

I couldn't say anything. I left the house without saying anything, went to the convenience store, used money I hadn't even earned myself, and then I woke up in this place. I ended up here without saying anything to my mom, to my dad, without washing my mug. I didn't wash a single mug, I didn't respond to my kind mom, and because of that, I'm dying in a place like this.

I caused all that trouble, couldn't repay anything they did for me, couldn't even wash a single mug, and now I'm going to die.

"…I'm going to die…"

Die. Every living being dies someday, but this is where I die. I'm going to be turned into a dirty, bloody pulp and die, surrounded by people I don't know, without my dad or my mom.

"———"

As he realized that, he felt death approaching. Watching him slumped over there from down the stairs. Laughing at him. He could see its mouth smiling, mocking him.

He recognized the face of death. Thinking of the people he had seen in this place so far from his parents, he quickly realized it. It was a trivial question. Death was wearing none other than his own face, smirking back at him.

"Don't laugh."

He glared at death; his eyes filled with a pitch-black hatred.

"Don't laugh. Don't you dare laugh. Don't you fucking laugh at me!"

Flying into a rage at the death that refused to stop smirking at him, Subaru stood up. Leaning against the wall, he approached death. Approached the death that refused to stop laughing.

"Don't you laugh at me. I'm going to die. But not because of you. I'm not gonna be killed by you…ngh."

For the first time, there was a disturbance in death's smirk.

It looked like annoyance at him for not doing as it wanted, not becoming its puppet. Getting a thrill out of that reaction, Subaru pushed on, his face still twisted in rage.

"I'm not going to be killed by you. I will die. I will definitely die! I will die! I did die! I died already! I died and came back here, but you aren't—"

—Going to kill me.

Just as he was about to say that…

"______"

His lips stopped moving how he wanted them to. And his eyes staring at death couldn't move. He felt himself lose all control of his own body.

He couldn't even ask why. All he could do was hope for some change.

I can't move. No, it's not my body that can't move. The world itself has stopped.

Death in front of him had stopped, too, face still warped in rage.

There was just one thing that moved in the frozen world.

"—I love you."

As best as he could tell, it was a woman in black.

A woman with slender limbs and wreathed in darkness. Her entire body was pure black.

Is she just darkness manifest? Or is she wearing black? I can't tell. Does it even matter?

It was an all-black woman. It seemed like she was also wearing a black outfit and a black veil that hid her face completely.

"—I love you."

But the woman shared an unimaginably powerful emotion with him.

How much emotion would have to be boiled down and concentrated to even get close to the words she whispered?

There was a certain quality to it. A quantity, a time, a weight, a value, a concept.

I don’t know how many people there are in the world who’ve said “I love you,” but if you combined every time it has ever been said into one, it would turn into her “I love you.”

And the woman extended her dark arm toward him.

Her slender fingertips reached through his chest, his skin, his flesh, his bones, until finally it was touching his beating heart.

“______”

His heart had felt its presence countless times in the past few minutes—couple dozen minutes? He had lost all track of time—but he never thought it so powerfully as he did in that moment.

He had never thought that being was annoying.

Because…

“—I love you.”

Her dark fingers caressed his heart with the same passion as she whispered her love.

At the same time, the shock that pierced him completely dominated his body that was so terrified of pain. His body shattered by the fall, his soul scorched by the unyielding heat, the guilt he felt toward his mother that wore at his heart—those were nothing compared to the pain he felt now.

If he could scream, then he would have.

If he could have shouted until his throat gave out, he might have been able to do something about the pain. If he could have focused on anything other than the pain, he might have been able to escape it.

But he couldn’t. He was forced to simply face the pain.

“—I love you.”

Her love wouldn’t release his heart.

It was almost as if she wouldn’t allow him to pay attention to anything other than her, like an unquenchable greed.

—As if her jealousy toward everything made him unable to turn away.

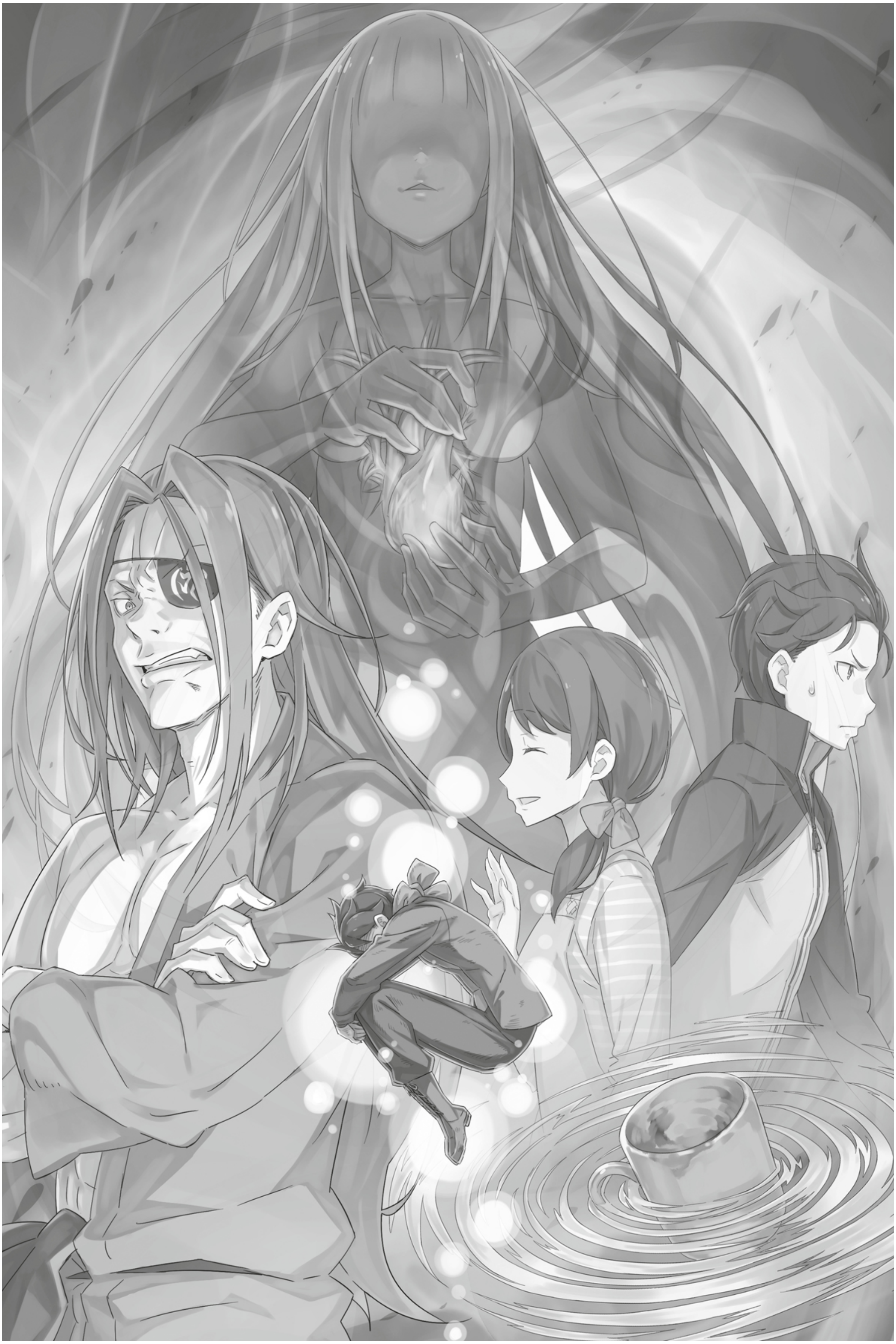
“—Hah.”

The release was sudden.

“______”

Exhaling, he collapsed on the spot.

Tears trickled down his face, and he wet his pants. A warm dampness spread from his crotch and trickled down the stairs.



The frozen death pointed at that pathetic, shameful act and cackled.

When he saw that laughing figure, he realized he had been duped.

It had planned it all, knowing if it pretended to show weakness, Subaru would leap at it, rousing a slumbering tiger that should never have been disturbed.

"Just…"

The rest of his thought did not make it into words.

He clutched his head. Blood was still trickling from his wounded fingers. The tears, the urine, everything felt like a punishment for his own weakness, his own foolishness.

…*Kill me already.*

Those words were not spoken.

Even if I was killed, can I really be killed?

He just kept crying like a foolish child, soaking in urine and despair, until the sound of footsteps and worried voices reached him from the stairs.

The ruined remnants of what was once a person kept crying. Just kept crying.

CHAPTER 3

HOLLOW SHELL

1

—Everything was shredded.

Just completely torn into tiny pieces and scattered. Everything.

He'd been found cowering on the stairs. When they led him back down, they asked what had happened. He could feel the situation getting worse as time passed.

A growing sense of futility took over since it was all out in the open for everyone to see. His missing memory, the frantic terror he felt toward his surroundings, all of it. His death was the only thing he didn't mention.

"So…you really don't remember anything…?"

Emilia's eyes were filled with grief. And not just her. No one could hide their shock at his explosive news.

This is the third time. It's already the third time I've let them down. And this time I ran off in terror and pissed myself while crying in a corner. Just the absolute worst possible way to do it.

And no one other than him even knew this was the worst outcome.

"Heh."

It's a big joke.

He was repeating the same situation—no, going through the exact same moment in time—for the third time. With his third time, Subaru finally understood the actual situation he found himself in.

—I died twice.

Both times he fell to his death, pushed over the edge in the spiral staircase, tragically broken and splattered. The first time he had just lost consciousness in midair, so he didn't realize it.

The second time, when he fully experienced such a gruesome, painful death, he finally awoke to the truth—and then he returned.

The moment I died, I returned to that green room to redo the same day.

Dying and returning. Returning by death.

That was the heavenly blessing given to Natsuki Subaru in this world.

"Heh."

It was the second chuckle he had. His well of tears had already run dry, so there was nothing left to do but laugh.

Emilia and the others struggled with how to handle Subaru after he managed to get so broken down the moment they took their eyes off him. Having lost not just his memories, but even his will, he was a fragile, dirty glass toy they were hesitant to touch. And despite being so easily broken, he was also garbage that was not even pleasing to the eye.

He had been taken back to the green room and left there to wait for new developments. Because she couldn't leave her precious sister with Subaru like that, Ram had taken her twin out of the room.

"…Poor Rem."

Subaru was in complete agreement with her parting comment.

"Subaru, just stay here and rest. Betty will do something to fix this."

"——"

"Betty won't let you stay curled up alone like this."

Even though she was still clearly bewildered, her young voice was brimming with a sense of duty. But Subaru couldn't even answer her.

Not only that, he rejected her outstretched finger, lowering his head deeply so she couldn't see his face.

"——"

She was a stranger. No matter what they said, they were all strangers.

But it wasn't their fault. It was Subaru. He was the stranger.

The familiarity they had for him, their concern, that feeling that approached a loving, tender trust—those were all directed at the original «Natsuki Subaru», not at this hollow shell.

I don't have any right to their affection.

But in the same way—

"…There's no reason for me to be killed, either."

Left behind alone in the room, Subaru gnashed his teeth.

Trust and affection he couldn't remember, losing the time and bonds that he had presumably built up—that was still better than being the target of an uncomfortable love. He could find a way to cope with that.

But why did he have to foot the bill for all the grudges «Natsuki Subaru» had accumulated too?

None of it's mine. Not the good or the bad. So why do I have to struggle like I'm about to drown?

"Leave me out of it…"

After a long, long period of self-questioning, Subaru slowly stood up. He had clenched his jaw too hard and drawn blood. As he started to walk out of the green room—suddenly something pulled on his sleeve.

"—"

It was the black lizard, his only companion in the room.

It let out a shrill whinny that clashed with its ferocious appearance, almost as if trying to get Subaru to stop. He almost detected a loneliness in its yellow eyes.

"This is stupid… If you want food, ask someone else."

Tugging his sleeve out of its mouth, Subaru turned away from the lizard's eyes and left the green room. Making sure no one else was around, he started walking.

"Where's water and food…"

He knew that much. He had gone to get water before, and he had been shown around the tower, too. He knew where to go. All that was left was to gather enough supplies and then he would leave the tower.

It's a natural decision. Since I was killed by someone pushing me off the edge.

"———"

Honestly, Subaru had no idea who might be the most likely suspect. But he had been murdered and there was no doubt someone in the tower was responsible.

There were seven suspects: Emilia, Beatrice, Ram, Echidna, Julius, Meili, Shaula. And he had no way of discerning friend from foe.

He couldn't even say for sure that they were actually comrades before he lost his memory. It was possible they were all assassins gathered in order to kill him.

—If I can convince myself that Emilia and Beatrice's eyes were just a lie…

"Damn it! Grow a spine, dumbass…"

Smothering the conflicting emotions in his heart, Subaru secretly took some water and food. If he was seriously only thinking about himself, it would probably have been best to take everything.

But he simply eyeballed three days' worth and left the rest. He justified it to himself with the rationale that the more he was carrying, the more difficult it would be to escape.

"From what they said, outside is a desert, but…"

He put on a cloak that was stored in the same place as the food, and a scarf to cover his mouth. And with water, food, and desert gear all gathered, he was as ready as he was going to be.

"I wonder if I'm past the time where I died before…"

Considering how long he had wasted miserably running away, the slow explanation of everything, and the time he had spent crouching in the green room, he was pretty sure that he had set a new personal best for survival.

I'm already putting my ability to use. I can avoid triggering all the death flags around me and keep surviving on a knife's edge.

"I don't want that."

What reason do I have to stay here if I have to suffer that?

Screw whatever «Natsuki Subaru» might have been trying to do. If it means suffering like that, there's no reason for me to cling to this place.

Setting his sights on the outside, Subaru reached the spiral staircase leading downward. Seeing the place he'd died twice before, every cell in his body screamed at him.

"—Ngh."

Catching his breath, Subaru cautiously checked behind him. He had to make absolutely sure that no one was sneaking up behind him, that no arm was stretching out to push him over.

Nothing. There's no one here. Right now, they're probably all in the archive full of books of the dead or else on that top floor with that evil test master. So this is the perfect chance. There is no better opportunity to just leave everything behind and run away.

Just abandon those kind people since it might just all be a lie.

That was it.

"What do I care! It's got nothing to do with me!"

Biting down on the hard-to-bear annoyance, Subaru took the stairs, stepping over his trauma.

He ran down the spiral stairs, setting his sights on the bottom floor below that he couldn't see yet. Up and down, trying to live and being killed, it was all so stupid and ridiculous.

But even so, I don't want to die. I don't want to die.

"A giant…door…"

As he rushed down the stairs, running out of breath, he could gradually see its outline taking shape. The unbelievably large door looked more than thirty feet tall.

It was almost like they were for letting giants in and out of the tower. The only things in the vast expanse of the fifth floor were a set of stairs leading further down to the sixth floor and that colossal door standing in the wall.

"———"

Subaru gulped, feeling a trace of sand in the air as he stood in front of the door. The sandy breeze blowing was proof that the gate connected to the outside of the tower.

If I get out of here, it's a desert—I don't know the desert's name anymore, but either way, there's a desert out there. If I make it through the desert and reach a human settlement, I can get away from whatever dangerous person is after me in this tower.

When moving in a desert, avoid being active during the hottest times, be careful of sandstorms, fix on the direction you are walking, and always walk toward that one point.

He had seen a story about suits being good in the desert in a manga, too, but that seemed dubious.

Honestly, that's all I really know about deserts. But still…

"Doing anything to save myself is better than hanging around somewhere where I'm one-hundred percent going to be killed."

I might not be thinking completely straight, but it is a hell of a lot scarier if I stop trusting myself in this situation. If I give into the fear, the only thing left will be death cackling and waiting for me.

"———"

Putting his hands on the giant door, he slowly pushed forward.

The door was more than ten times Subaru's size, with the sort of weight that shouldn't budge even if he pushed with all his strength. But just from leaning his hands on it, the door opened easily, as if by some mechanical contraption.

"Huh?"

The door opened more than he intended in the push, so he stopped and carefully peeked outside. He was worried about a trap or someone waiting for him, but he was greeted only by the night sky and a sea of sand.

Narrowing his eyes, he scanned the horizon, but he couldn't see an end to the desert in any direction.

"…It really…is a desert…"

He couldn't see any buildings. Just a colossal ocean of sand. After making his preparations to step out into it, he turned back toward the interior of the tower one last time. What compelled him was the guilt he felt about leaving behind the people who bore no malice for Subaru.

But he pointedly shook it off. His lingering attachment to the outside—to his former world—was even greater.

I don't want to be here.

Because to Natsuki Subaru, home was the house where his father and mother were waiting.

"So…"

He stepped firmly through the door.

On the other side, he felt his shoes sinking deeper into the sand than he'd expected. With a powerful step, Natsuki Subaru walked into the outside world.

And—

"…Eh…"

There was a large explosion beneath where he stepped, sending his body flying high up into the air.

2

Blown up into the air by a blast that came from directly below him, Subaru's mind flew into a panic.

“———”

It was a complete panic—he had thought panic was just the normal state of things for him now, but his sense of confusion just kept growing.

There was an effect called tachypsychia, where the world appeared to move in slow motion, like during a traffic accident. And with the world flipping upside down and seemingly moving frame by frame, Subaru saw *it.*

It was a creature with a terrifying, powerful body that appeared out of the sands. It had slippery-looking skin, no limbs, and a mouth-hole filled with ferocious fangs. A giant worm.

A monster more than thirty feet long.

“Gwahhhh!”

The shock of something so far-removed from reality was interrupted by a physical one. Landing on his back in the sand, his lungs spasmed and he couldn't breathe.

The worm had leapt out from below ground, sending Subaru into the air, and he ended up falling on the ground. And what he needed to do next was…

“You bastard!”

That worm had been unmistakably waiting underground for prey. And at this rate, Subaru was going to become worm food. The only way to survive was to run back into the tower.

It had just been two steps outside—but with how far he'd been thrown by the worm, he would have to cover the distance between the door and where he fell.

“Dodge the worm, get back inside, close the door…?”

Like a curse, his head filled with the looming question of whether he could even manage that. But the next instant, his instincts concluded that was the only chance he had if he wanted to survive.

“One shot, just one shot. One shot. One shot…”

Pulling the scarf around his neck up to cover his mouth, he carefully watched the worm's movements with bloodshot eyes.

That monster's gonna go for me, and I have to use that one opening.

In order to live, Natsuki Subaru put his body and soul into it—

“——!!”

There was an unimaginable, ear-splitting screech as the giant worm charged at Subaru. Hearing a thunderous crash and wind howling, he searched for an opening between the worm and the desert in order to escape—and the moment he saw it, he envisioned twisting himself through that gap.

Fully focused, he kicked off the sand, dodging the worm's first attack just like he'd pictured. The shockwave and sandstorm kicked up by the attack sent him flying. But he was alive.

"Haah…gh!"

His body moved more responsively than he remembered.

For a split second, forgotten memories of the year he had lived as «Natsuki Subaru» flashed in the back of his mind. It was the experience «Natsuki Subaru» gained surviving that year in this harsh world that saved his life.

"Now—"

Keeping his momentum, Subaru started to run toward the entrance to the tower.

Just sixty feet. I can sprint that mu—

"—ch"

The next moment, the sand exploded, not from the worm's head, but from its tail that was still buried underground. The tail broke the surface, clipping his legs and sending him flying again.

As he screamed, Subaru saw the worm's head below as the world spun around him. It was opening its giant maw, as if to usher him into its toothy mouth.

"—Ah."

—I was too naive.

Thinking he could escape a beast that survived in this crazy environment when he'd been raised in a world that might as well be a hothouse. Just stupidly shallow and thoughtless. And the price was going to be his life again.

"No."

As he fell, he kicked his legs like an insect that had lost its wings.

I'm going to die. Again? Even if I do, will I really die? What happens if I do actually die here? Could I endure that?

If all that awaited after this time was just eternal darkness…

"Nooooooo!"

He reached toward the night sky, screaming desperately for help.

It was not something that could be reached. In his shrouded vision, he couldn't see the stars in the fuzzy sky above. All alone, he fell.

Abandoned even by the stars whose name he shared, he would be swallowed by a monster and disappear.

As that despair sank in, a white light flashed.

"———"

The flash of light blew the giant worm's head off.

Bathed in the white glow, its head warped like a melting sugar sculpture and then exploded. Nasty-looking blood and flesh splattered, and its hideous face was erased. But that was not the end.

Lights flashed one after the other, shooting holes through the worm's giant body. The worm's body twisted as it turned into Swiss cheese, tore, and became filled with holes.

And that Subaru was not also hit by the barrage was mere chance, a silver lining to the darkest, deadliest clouds he could imagine.

"—Ah."

The same shock as earlier, slamming defenselessly down into the sand, happened again. Narrowly avoiding the fate of being eaten by a monster worm, Subaru fell splayed on the sand.

Up above, he still couldn't see any stars in the sky.

Even though he'd managed to survive for some reason, he was still abandoned by his namesake.

People grew exasperated with him, putting their hopes in him, abandoning him, hating him, caring about him, distancing themselves from him.

Did he want to live or die? Did he want to be or not?

"What do you want from me?! If you've got an answer, tell me already!"

Covering his face, he screamed at the blank sky.

There was no answer. No one could give him the answer he wanted. If there was anyone who even had it, then it was just—

"—Tell me, Natsuki Subaru. "

It was right after that pitiful, hoarse plea.

Beneath Subaru's feet, there was a giant tremor that shook the sand. It was the shuddering of the headless, hole-ridden worm's corpse. Thanks to the timely help of the white light, Subaru had managed to survive. But that was not the end.

"—Ngh."

The tremors after the giant body hit the ground did not stop, and finally even Subaru's world started shaking.

His vision wobbled up and down. The cause was the ground that had been weakened by the worm moving beneath it. The worm's body slamming down had been the last straw.

"Ugh, uwaaaah!"

The surface broke and the worm's body slipped underground. And Subaru, as if caught in an antlion's trap, was dragged down too, unable to resist the furious torrent of earth.

He desperately tried to fight it, but it was hopeless. Everything he tried to cling to was swallowed up in the sand, too.

His arms and legs were buried, and he couldn't move. Facing up, he frantically gasped.

"Help, someone, help…"

Everything after that was muffled as he slipped into the sand and fell.

And the stars above didn't pay any heed to Subaru pathetically struggling down below.

× × ×

"Kahah."

The first thing he felt when he regained consciousness was an overwhelming, stifling pressure, and the taste of sand.

Coughing, he managed to clear out the unpleasant feeling in his mouth. Forcing his eyes to open, he teared up as he looked around. It was dark.

As best he could tell, he'd been dropped into a terribly dark and cold place.

"This is… Right, that giant worm almost ate me…"

Shaking his aching head, he thought back to what had just happened.

He'd decided to abandon everything and run away from the tower, but on his very first step out of the door, he had been blocked by a giant worm. And just when he was about to be eaten by the worm and die, a white light had saved him…

"Beneath…the desert…"

The sand had given way and he'd been pulled underground. It wouldn't have been strange to be buried alive, but Subaru had just barely managed to survive by the skin of his teeth.

Though at present, Subaru was dubious whether he would actually die even if the worst had happened.

—Starting again from that room?

"———"

Pushing through that oppressive, curse-like resignation, Subaru dug at the sand around him.

The pressure he felt earlier was due to being buried in sand from the waist down. In the darkness with no source of light, he carefully, slowly extracted himself.

There was still the unpleasant feeling of sand in his clothes, but he managed to break free. Then he started feeling around to check his surroundings instead of relying on his eyes.

It was dark, and he couldn't see anything.

It honestly makes me wonder if I'm really still in the world of the living.

"…It *is* another world, after all. It wouldn't be weird if there was a hell here.”

In the world of myths, it wasn’t rare for there to be a land of the dead underground. Maybe his falling had been into that same sort of space. His body felt cold and dead to the touch, so maybe that was why.

“What, am I stupid? No…I’m definitely stupid… It’s obviously just because I was buried in sand.”

Shaking off those pointless delusions, Subaru rubbed his chilly hands together. The cold sand had robbed him of body heat. *How long was I unconscious?*

I guess not being eaten by some other monster living underground is a silver lining to this crap.

“?”

As he thought that, his knee, which had been resting on the ground, hit something. He stretched his hand out to confirm what it was and felt a leather bag between his fingers.

It was the pack of food and water he’d carried with him out of the tower. He quickly pulled a water bottle out and put it to his lips to wet his parched throat. Just a tiny bit of water ran across his tongue.

“Shit, it leaked? …What about the food…?”

Sitting on the sand and rifling through the bag to see what was left, he noticed what was wrong.

The leather bag stuffed with several days’ worth of supplies was empty. All of the emergency rations he had packed…were gone. But they hadn’t been swallowed up in the torrents and become scraps lost in the sand.

They were scattered all around. Haphazardly. As if someone had rummaged through everything.

“…Huh?”

Because of the darkness, Subaru couldn’t grasp what was going on with the mound of sand he’d been buried in. But the rations he had brought with him were scattered here and there, all around it. They had been torn into, eaten up, and strewn wildly around him.

Subaru gulped.

—Not good, not good, not good, not good.

Fear consumed his mind as he stood in the middle of all the food that had been eaten.

That giant worm crawled out of here. It wouldn’t be weird if something else was down here.

The skin-crawling situation he found himself in could even be a message from some mysterious monster.

“I-I have to get outta here…”

He scrambled to shove what food he could into the bag. He didn’t want to risk standing up in the dark, so he crawled around on all fours, checking the ground.

Literally groping in the dark, he crawled away, fleeing in abject terror.

He crawled in the darkness, confirming the ground below him and his own existence. Crawling. Crawling.

Unsure whether he should head above ground or just for somewhere else not there, he simply ran. He couldn't do anything but run.

—I can't do anything…but run.

3

In front of him, there was a light when his fingers touched a gate barring his way, and then the gate disappeared. As if it came undone.

The next moment, a noxious stench assaulted his nostrils from down the path that had just opened.

"______"

Puckering his face, Subaru pushed through the darkness, following the stench. The underground was still dark and cold everywhere he went, so that stench was his only guide.

—Several hours had passed since he had fallen into the ground and started scurrying around.

In his blind flight, Subaru's will had almost broken several times already. He'd slipped down several sand hills, had paths blocked by walls, and been sent into tremors from a rain of sand falling from above.

It had been a long, long time. Long enough that he couldn't even laugh at the wild joke of wondering whether he'd just failed to notice he was already dead and was simply wandering lost in hell.

The only reason he'd kept moving was because he was scared of the end that awaited him if he stopped. He was desperate to get as far away as he could—until he noticed the stench.

The noxious odor assaulted his nostrils as he wildly chased after it.

To Subaru, who had spent hours wandering blindly in the dark, that had been the only relief. That had been the only change he'd been able to find underground.

It was his only thread in order to escape hell.

And as he followed it, he'd encountered yet another gate blocking his passage through the sand.

"This is the third one…"

On all fours, he looked down at the hand that had touched the cold gate for just a second.

The gate stood between Subaru and his path following the terrible scent. No, that was too grandiose a way to put it. The gate wasn't barring Subaru's way at all.

Despite blocking the passage so completely, it disappeared the moment he touched it. Vanished like smoke. So the gates never once stopped Subaru. And every time he passed a gate, the stench grew stronger.

In other words, the more gates he passed, the closer he came to the source of the smell.

"Hah, hah, hah…"

Breathing raggedly like a dog, he followed his nose in search of a signpost.

He'd heard that animals living underground often lost most, if not all, of their vision through evolution while their other senses grew sharper and sharper. It had only been a few hours, but he could tell that his other senses had grown more sensitive to compensate for not being able to rely on his sight.

He pushed his sense of smell to track the stench and his sense of touch to track the slightest breeze to their limits. And in doing so, he was able to forget the shapeless fear gripping his heart.

He cherished the darkness and silence, the solitude where he was unthreatened by anyone.

The lukewarm, muddy stagnation cradled his desperate heart, and he could feel the sticky water seeping into him as he entrusted his body to it.

It would be easier to just melt away into that stagnation.

"—Ah?"

Suddenly, a hoarse sound escaped his parched throat.

It was a reaction to a change. But it was not a good reaction.

"———"

Kneeling in front of a gate, Subaru ran his hands over it. The gate had just let Subaru pass without issue so many times before, but now, after all that, it bared its fangs.

He pushed and pulled, but the gate did not budge. It had suddenly decided to block his way.

"This isn't funny!"

With that sudden betrayal, Subaru was filled with shock, and even more so, anger.

He had passed the fourth gate and was trying to pass the fifth one. He didn't have any clue what about it was different, but this gate was trying to stop Subaru.

The powerless Natsuki Subaru had no means of forcing it open.

Getting thrown off the track I was following, after all this…

"—Ngh."

His mind went red in rage as he slammed his head against the gate.

As his forehead pummeled it again and again, pain shot through him as his skull rattled each time. As terrified as he'd been of pain before, his rage in that moment surpassed it all, drowning everything else out.

A pitch-black emotion welled up from inside.

It was an inexorable torrent of fury that had taken root in his heart from the moment he first caught a trace of the noxious scent.

He'd been able to ignore the emotion while he was blindly following the signposts. But now, the inexpressible negativity, the darkness born from being shouldered with such an unreasonable, unfair fate, exploded.

Why did this have to happen to me? Why do I have to suffer like this? If there is some god out there who gave me this fate, I'll bludgeon them to death. There's no reason I had to suffer this fate.

"It's not my fault…"

It's everything around me making this hell happen.

So why…

"Go back…? This shit isn't funny. Why are you getting in my way?!"

Shouting was a pointless waste of energy. Or worse, it might draw the attention of a ferocious monster lurking somewhere underground.

But letting go of that entirely reasonable common sense, Subaru slammed his head against the gate and screamed.

This was a gate made just for him. He could tell immediately. So why was it blocking his way? Why, when getting beyond it, revealing what lay behind it, meeting what lay in wait was his role?

—Why is this gate, why is ■■■■■■ blocking me?

"Wha—"

As he unleashed an irrational rage on the gate, suddenly, a change occurred.

Perhaps a change of heart after his venting, or else as a preset exit for those who couldn't pass the gate.

But just as the previous gates had done before, this time Subaru's body glowed faintly, surrounded in a light that lit the darkness.

"Don't…gh! This isn't funny!"

In a rage, he cursed the gate and raised his head again.

But before he could slam his head down again, his body disappeared from that place, just like the gates before had. Not starting from one part, but all at once.

He tried to resist, but the light didn't listen. The absurdity of the world was as deaf to Subaru's opinions as ever, forcing itself on him like always.

It was like that again this time. Events proceeded without paying any heed to his thoughts.

And thus—

"Hah."

Right after the light flickered bright, Subaru was freed from the cold underground.

"————"

Dumbfounded, Subaru looked down at his hands.

He saw dried-out hands covered in sand. He could see them.

Naturally. Because there was light. There was color. There was a stone floor visible beneath his feet.

A stone floor…

"—Ngh."

As it finally clicked in his head, Subaru leapt aside and looked all around himself.

He was standing in the middle of a vast space, and turning around, he saw something familiar behind him and immediately recognized where he was.

—Behind him was the giant gate closing off the building from the outside.

It was the giant door on the fifth floor of the Pleiades Watchtower that Subaru had used a few hours earlier.

In other words, he was inside the tower…

"Don't…"

But he couldn't finish that angry shout. The words wouldn't come out.

He couldn't understand. It hadn't even been a minute ago that he'd been underground, beneath the sand in a darkness so complete he couldn't even see his hands in front of him. But in the blink of an eye, he'd returned inside the tower. It was a violent assault on logic even after taking into account that this was a fantasy world.

The appearance of a nightmarish absurdity just demanded he accept it, demanded he understand it.

"Run, run, and run some more…"

And as payback for that pathetic running away, I get this.

There were countless beings in this world that Subaru couldn't begin to match, with that worm monster topping the list, and no matter how desperately he ran, his efforts were all in vain.

Even though the reason he'd run was because he didn't want to die…because he didn't want to just wait and cower in fear…

"Nothing maters."

Exhaustion washed over him. The strength slipped from his knees. Steadying himself to keep from slumping to the ground, Subaru let out a long, deep sigh.

A calm, quiet acceptance expressed in an understanding of the rage burbling in his heart.

The feeling brought about by that acceptance and understanding lingered in his eyes as he slowly looked up. The corners of his lips softened.

I should have realized the answer sooner.

"______"

Why had he needed to crawl around in the darkness for so long? Because someone was plotting to kill him. Had killed him. Not just once but twice. Because there was a murderer hiding their intention behind a composed mask while putting their twisted plan into action.

—And the possible suspects have been whittled down to someone *in the tower, haven't they?*

—If I know that much, then isn't there an easy solution?

—If someone is trying to kill me, then I just have to…

"…kill them first."

Knowledge of the future gleaned from his return-by-death ability. That was Natsuki Subaru's advantage.

No matter what plan the murderer concocted, they would never expect Subaru to be aware of their murderous intent in advance. Their plan was falling apart from the beginning.

"Heeheehahaha."

With an evil grin, Subaru clenched his fist at the revelation that brought him back from the brink.

In that case, there was no time to be wasted. Heeding his conclusion, Subaru quickly started moving. Breathing softly, he started up the long, long spiral stairs leading up to the fourth floor.

When he'd run down them to escape, he had been terrified of the stairs, but not now. When he'd walked up them in order to live, they were dear to his heart.

"I don't know who my enemy is, but…"

I'll teach them a goddamn lesson.

The dark emotion scorched his body as he headed up the stairs with a ferocious grin. The dark hope of cornering the person who killed him guided him forward.

"I'll kill you. Kill. I swear I'll kill you…"

An ominous curse dripped from his lips.

If words contained power, then the hex he was weaving empowered his thirst for vengeance. It felt like his body was swelling with greater strength each time he said it.

"Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill…"

He muttered to himself as he sniffed the air. There was a faint whiff of the same stench that he'd tasted so much of underground. Or was the fact that he was smelling it still, so far from the underground, proof that it now filled him completely?

Light and color returned, he could see again, but even still the stench slipped into his nostrils, burning his chest. That searing heat drove his legs forward to bring him closer to his enemy.

He'd wandered in the sea of sand for hours, and his head was heavy from the spent stamina. His thoughts were dull. That allowed him to forget the scent he was following and the murderous curse he was spinning.

"Kill, kill, kill, kill…"

Kill to protect myself. Before they kill me. Not because I want to, but because I have to.

—Because he had to kill in order to live. Because he didn't want to die.

So he decided to immediately kill the first person he saw. Settling that in his mind, he climbed the stairs, spinning his hex, until he reached the fourth floor. To where everything began after he lost his memories.

And—

"—Hah."

—He found Shaula lying on the floor with her head brutally crushed.

4

Shaula’s corpse was in such a grisly state, it made him want to cover his eyes.

The tie holding long black hair was undone and her hair spread out as if covering the floor. Her limbs were splayed limply. Her arms were cut off at the elbows and wrists, the ends nowhere to be found.

There were cuts all over her pale, healthy-looking skin and a tremendous amount of blood had splattered all over the passage. Tracks of blood continued down the hallway, showing the gruesome battle had been long and covered a large amount of ground.

And the most brutal of all, the wound to her head that had been the fatal blow—though it couldn’t really even be described as a wound. Her head had been shattered in one shot and her face couldn’t be made out anymore.

The smile she’d flashed at Subaru so many times filled his head—

“—Ugh.”

He knelt down and voided everything in his stomach. It was basically empty except for bile, which burned his throat and filled the back of his nose with a bitter taste. How many times had he tasted it over the past half a day?

How many times would he have to go through this torture?

“Uegh! Ughh, gah, bgh…”

It wasn’t just nausea. Tears welled in his eyes. He didn’t have the capacity to pity Shaula as vomit fell on her body. But her death seared itself into his brain.

—It was his first time…seeing someone actually dead.

“Haah, haah, haah…”

He had never seen a real corpse in his life.

In most cases, the first dead person someone might see would be an older family member. But Subaru’s grandparents on both sides of the family were still healthy, and he’d never been to a funeral.

And outside of that, there’d been no occasion when he had seen anyone else’s corpse—so Shaula’s dead body was his first exposure to death.

The shock was staggering. It burned into his soul, and he couldn’t get it out.

The fact that people could have their lives so brutally stolen from them.

“Me…too…”

His breathing was ragged as he finally controlled the nausea.

He’d been pushed off the spiral stairs and fallen to the ground far below. His corpse should have been a grisly mass of flesh, too. He couldn't see his own dead body, and he felt genuine relief at that.

If I somehow could see my own dead body, there is no way I could stay sane.

Not when simply realizing he'd died was enough to tear his heart in two and make it feel like his mind was going to shatter.

"Any…anyway…"

Averting his eyes from the headless corpse, Subaru mourned Shaula's death. But at the same time, he was sure that some terrifying discord was skulking in the tower.

Shaula had been killed. By the same person responsible for murdering him.

"So Shaula wasn't the killer…"

Before, Subaru had no way of narrowing down the suspects, but this naturally removed one person from the list. That left six: Emilia, Beatrice, Ram, Echidna, Julius, and Meili. One of them was the killer. And that made things easier.

The relief he could only secure by killing seven people could now be his for the price of merely six lives.

If he just killed the murderer trying to kill him, and killed all the suspects who might have tried to kill him, then he would be left alone in the tower, and he could indulge in a solitude where no one threatened him.

"In that sense, Ram and Echidna are obstacles… Julius too. It would be better if they could just go and get themselves killed without me."

Beatrice and Meili are little girls, so killing them shouldn't be too hard. Emilia will be easy to get the drop on since she lets her guard down so much around me. Same for Shaula, though she's already dead now. But Ram is defiant, and Echidna is crafty. Getting the drop on them probably won't be easy. And Julius is even worse: he's a guy and he's packing a sword.

I've done kendo, though, so if I could steal that sword, I might be able to turn the table on him.

All that was left was—

"That bastard upstairs."

His body shuddered at the thought of the red-haired test master waiting at the top of those long stairs. The thought of even trying to kill that man made his soul scream that it was impossible.

He's an exception, out of bounds, a superhuman removed from all worldly logic and not to be tested.

The one saving grace was that it was hard to imagine him being the one who pushed Subaru over the edge. Subaru had a twisted faith that that man would never have picked such a boring method to kill him.

"______"

Subaru wiped his mouth, got up, and stepped over Shaula's body.

There was no time to bury her, and he didn't have any words to say over her grave. But he didn't have any reason to humiliate her, either. She was dead. Anyone dead was not an enemy anymore. The dead posed no threat to him. They were his only allies. The death he'd feared so much was now his savior.

Pushing forward, there were heavy signs of fighting in the passage. There were marks on the floor and walls, and blood that was probably Shaula's splattered here and there. He followed the path while lowering his breath and walking quietly, to not be noticed by whatever waited ahead.

From the moment he reached the fourth floor, he'd focused his senses that were already sharpened by the killer curse he'd been weaving. Moving in a silence that hurt his ears, he strained to hear even the slightest change.

He had seen Shaula's dead body, but his need to kill was unquelled.

He had the resolve to grab the first person he found, to tear into them, to steal their life.

And yet—

"______"

—When he rounded the corner and found Echidna's corpse, Subaru was left wondering what worth his resolve was in the hell he'd stumbled into.

5

—Echidna had been cut by a single slash from her left shoulder to her right side.

“______”

—Ram’s torso had been blown out from behind, leaving a gaping hole below her chest.

“______”

—Julius’s body was the grisliest, covered in countless wounds.

“______”

—Meili was shielded by Julius’s back, killed by what seemed like a clean, calm blow.

Subaru threw up.

Whenever he saw their corpses, more times than he could count, Natsuki Subaru threw up.

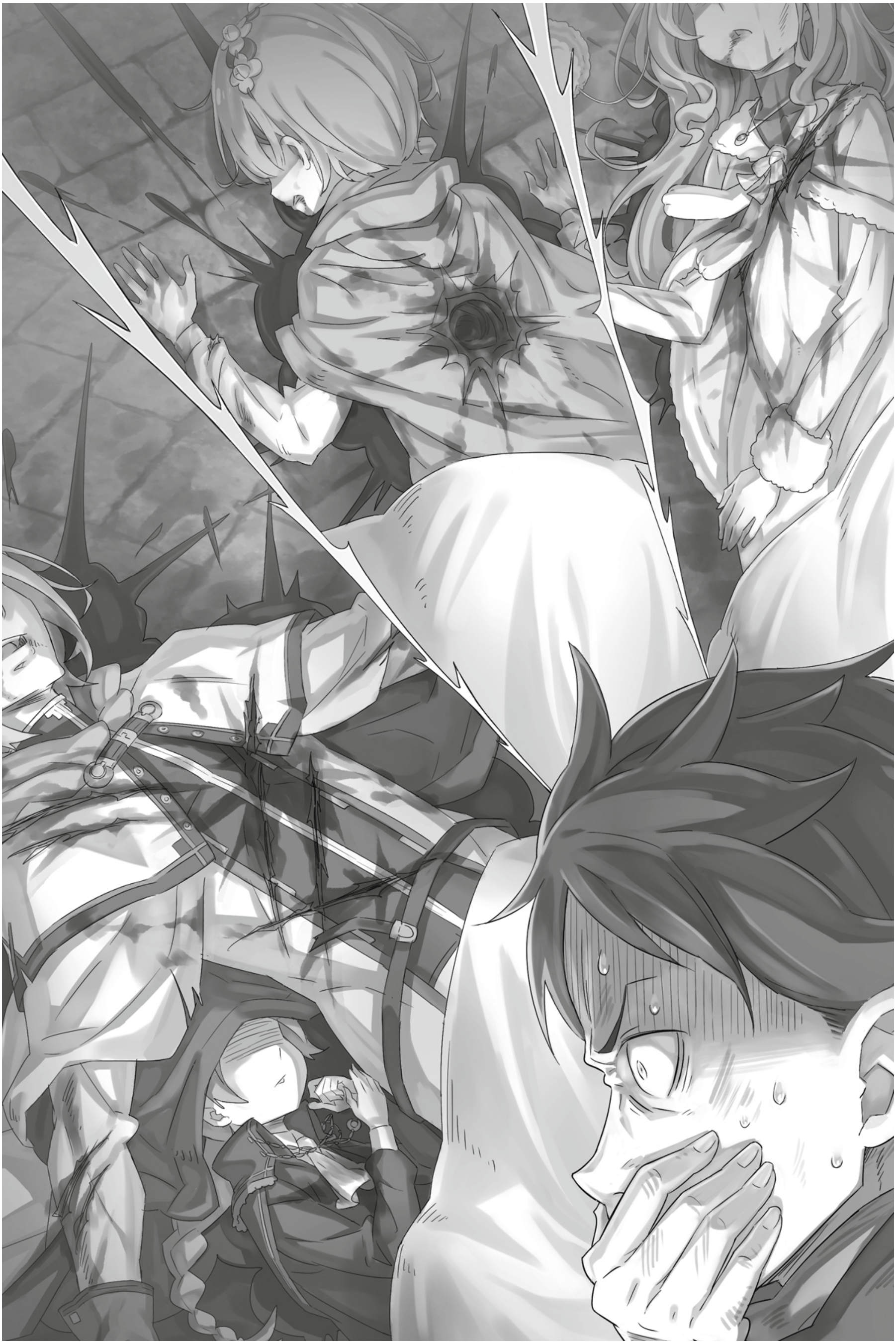
Corpses, corpses, corpses, corpses, corpses.

There was nothing but corpses.

Echidna’s body had been rent by a large blade. Ram’s face was twisted in loathing, struggling against death until her final breath. Julius’s wounds were a result of fighting the killer to the last in order to protect the girl behind him, though his efforts were in vain. And he couldn’t understand why, but for some reason Meili’s face was terribly tranquil in death.

Their corpses were partially covered by white cloths. The four corpses other than Shaula’s showed signs of someone mourning them. That thoughtful gesture made no sense.

—Everything was beyond his comprehension. Natsuki Subaru was in hell.



"Emilia and Beatrice…"

He had found five corpses, leaving two suspects.

One of them or possibly both of them working together are responsible for this hellish scene?

When did this even happen?

"The blood…"

He didn't have any special knowledge about crime scene investigation, but the blood spilled was dried.

They didn't die peacefully. So for all the blood spilled to have dried, it would take at least a few hours, maybe a dozen? In which case at least that much time has passed since they died.

How long had he wandered beneath the sand?

"—Ah."

"———"

When he entered a familiar room in search of Emilia and Beatrice, his eyes widened.

In the green room filled with plants, deep inside it, his eyes met the giant black lizard's eyes. It was the first living gaze he had met since returning to the tower—

"And it's a lizard…?"

He clicked his tongue at such a disappointing encounter.

Ideally, he would have found Emilia or Beatrice's corpse. It wouldn't change the incomprehensible reality of what had seemingly happened, but at the very least it would have soothed his mind some.

Not managing even that much, Subaru immediately left the green room. He had no use for a room that was empty aside from a lizard. But…

"Don't follow me!"

The lizard sluggishly stood up and came after him.

Its body had the imposing stature of a horse, and the sharp claws and fangs gave him plenty of reason to be wary. Finding no other target for his rage, Subaru glared at the lizard.

"I don't have time to play with you! I gotta murder whoever's still left alive in this tower! If you're gonna get in my way, then…!"

He menacingly swung the sword he'd picked up from beside Julius's corpse. Around a third of the blade had snapped off, but there was enough to serve as a weapon.

But the lizard just looked at Subaru swinging the broken sword with quiet eyes, not moving.

"Ugh…"

That this creature didn't feel the need to bare its fangs at his weapon made him feel like it was laughing at Subaru's weak heart. And in order to hide the fact that he was feeling overawed…

"—Don't fuck with me!"

Subaru shouted as he hit the lizard's neck with the broken sword.

The broken blade's edge broke through its scales, and after a little resistance, stabbed into the flesh beneath. There was an unpleasant feeling and red blood started to flow from the lizard's body. The blade had sunk in deeply.

"How about…that…"

"———"

The exhilaration of wounding a living creature for the first time in his life immediately vanished.

The reason was the lizard's eyes—They were the same as before he stabbed it, just quietly looking at Subaru. The lizard paid no heed to the sword stuck so deeply into it. It simply continued watching what Natsuki Subaru was doing.

Its reptilian eyes were unreadable, but Natsuki Subaru still screamed.

"Damn it…damn it, damn it, damn it! What! What?!"

"———"

"You, everyone else, and the corpses, too! And the people still alive! And everyone else, too! What are you thinking?! What do you want?!"

Tearing at his head, Subaru hurled the unreasonable, confused emotions he felt straight at the lizard.

He howled, channeling all the desolate, pessimistic feelings that had built up as he wandered lost in a tower of dead people, wandered lost in a dark underground where he couldn't see anything, wandered lost in another world where he didn't know left from right.

"I'll kill everyone who tried to kill me! I'll push away anyone who wants to rely on me! So don't get it twisted! Don't get ahead of yourself! Acting all friendly 'cause it's convenient for you… What bullshit!"

"———"

"I don't know any of you! Not a single one of you bastards! I couldn't even begin to guess what any of you are thinking! Everyone's just shoving their own problems onto me…! If you all have your hands full with your shit, then maybe I've got my hands full with my own shit, too!"

Screaming and shouting, Subaru fell to his knees. At some point he had started crying.

The lizard in front of him didn't say anything, just watching Subaru as his shoulders heaved raggedly. He did not meet its eyes, just curling up and pushing his head against the floor.

"Just forget me already… Just abandon me… Just leave me alone…"

The tearful voice he managed to force past his lips echoed hollowly in the quiet passage.

Kneeling down, he pleaded. As if begging for forgiveness, as if praying for salvation, as if clinging to any god.

He implored the world itself to set him free from his hopeless predicament.

And his plea was—

“—Eh?”

—Answered by countless dark hands that appeared along with a tremor as if the entire tower was shaking.

6

Ironically, the reason he first noticed the tremor was because he was kneeling on the floor.

It was faint, but gradually it grew clearer, until it exploded ferociously up from beneath them—in a beat, a pitch-black fog blew up through the bottom of the fourth floor and filled the passage.

“—Ngh.”

The fog exploded upward, blowing away the passage’s floor, walls, and ceiling in an explosion of dust. But the fog continued surging forward, greedily in search of prey, as if it were the manifestation of a desire to consume anything and everything within reach.

—The image of the dark woman who had looked at him crept into Subaru’s mind.

“———”

The dark woman in a black wedding dress who had so thoroughly tortured his heart. The dark fog spilling in front of him resembled her veil of shade.

It tore through the passage, chasing Subaru, or rather the lizard carrying Subaru away.

“You…!”

It had started the instant the floor had broken apart. The fog was after Subaru.

Kneeling and unable to move, he should have been consumed in that first moment. But he was saved by the lizard. The lizard hooked its fangs into his shoulder and forcibly lifted him, trying to get Subaru as far from the fog’s furious onslaught as possible.

The speed was breathtaking, and seeing the black fog speeding up chilled him to the bone.

He understood it on an instinctive level. Being consumed by that fog would lead to a fate more terrifying than mere death.

“—!!”

He clung to the lizard’s neck as it ran, and the lizard’s fangs bit deeper into his shoulder. But the pain in the moment and his distrust of the lizard were dwarfed by his terror of that shadow.

“Th-the spiral stairs…”

While Subaru kept holding on for dear life, the lizard sprinted through the hall with the shadow in hot pursuit. Suddenly, his field of view opened, and Subaru’s eyes shot open.

The giant spiral staircase he’d dragged himself up and the three-hundred-foot hole leading to the lower floor had been consumed by a massive black fog, losing any distinct form.

In other words, the black shade had already consumed most of the lower half of the tower.

There's nowhere to run.

For a second, Subaru considered the possibility of suicide.

"______"

Being swallowed by that pit of darkness meant a more terrifying end than just death. In which case, wouldn't it be better to throw his own life away? Because even if he died…

"No…"

He rejected that idea.

There was the possibility of return by death, but he couldn't choose suicide. There was a chance that if he committed suicide, he might not get any more chances. *Can I really reset if I don't get another chance to try again after?*

And why do I have to die anyway?

I haven't done anything wrong, so why do I have to die?

"Nooo! I don't want to die!"

Subaru wept without concern for shame or appearance.

But there was no human in the tower to hear his plea. Just the dead and the missing.

—So the jet-black lizard answered instead.

"—!"

Hearing Subaru's despair, it let out a shrill whinny and, in the face of a world shrouded in darkness, began a head-on counterattack.

Spinning quickly, it slipped its large body past the fog closing in. In the narrow space, its scales scraping the wall, it ran in a fervent search for a path to survival.

In order to live—no, in order to save Subaru who had so desperately begged not to die.

"You…"

Trembling from the fierce pace, Subaru looked at the lizard in disbelief. Its face was unreadable, but its yellow eyes alone shone with powerful emotion.

Under the weight of the overflowing fog, the tower's walls buckled, and the passage collapsed. But the lizard blazed its own trail, searching for a place where the grasping fog wouldn't reach, earnestly running with all its strength.

"—!"

There was a dull ache from where its fangs bit into his shoulder. But what was seared into his mind more was the blood trickling from the lizard's mouth—it was running from the shadow, but it couldn't evade everything. Its body was in a terrible state, torn all over wherever the shadow had managed to reach it.

And yet, Subaru's wounds were extremely limited. And the reason was obvious. The lizard was sacrificing its own body in order to make sure the shadow's fury didn't reach Subaru.

"—Ugh?!"

Subaru's face tensed at that realization, but then the lizard's fangs sank in a little deeper. There was more force in its bite as it twisted its slender neck and swung Subaru's body.

The next moment, the fangs slid out of his shoulder, and he was sent flying with a sharp pain.

"———"

It all happened as if the world was moving in slow motion.

The shadow had blocked the path both forward and back, sealing off any escape. Realizing this, the lizard had thrown Subaru toward the wall—but when he should have slammed into it, he instead passed through.

It was an incomprehensible, sudden thing. The wall was seemingly not real and just designed to appear solid. But none of that mattered in that moment.

The fact of the matter was that Subaru passed through the wall while the lizard was left in the passage.

And—

"Lizard…gh!"

He reached out toward the lizard. The lizard he had hurt in an unreasonable rage, that he'd cursed so heartlessly, but that had still run so gallantly trying to save him.

But he was powerless. His fingers couldn't reach from here. The lizard was swallowed up by the onrushing shadow.

The lizard disappeared inside the shadow that contained a fate worse than death.

"Wh-why…"

Just after watching that, his body finished passing through the wall and he escaped behind it. After hitting his back hard and rolling, splayed out on the ground, he saw the night sky spread out above him.

The night sky—It was a balcony set into the outside of the tower.

There was no surprise that there was a place like this. But looking up at the sky in an unexpected place, Subaru heard his hollow heart crack.

"What is this…?"

Subaru didn't understand anything anymore.

Something suddenly cut across his field of vision as he stared up dumbfounded. It passed from left to right through the sky, landing on the railing of the balcony to rest its white wings.

It was a single white bird. A big bird, looking at Subaru with emotionless eyes.

“Hah.”

The dead suspects, the suspects he hadn’t found, the lizard that had given its life to save him, and the white bird that suddenly appeared. And the tower gradually being swallowed by the shadows and disappearing into the hungry darkness.

“———”

Feeling the end coming, Subaru sat up and reached toward the sky.

He could understand the lizard had tried so hard in order to save him. He could understand it, but that thought was still pointless in the end. All it had done was extend his time a little bit.

“———”

And as he wasted that extra time, Subaru suddenly noticed something.

There was a presence behind him. Not the bird, not the lizard, and not the shadow.

There was a living person standing right behind him.

“…What are you…?”

Not having the strength to turn around, Subaru’s voice was listless.

There was a faint noise as whoever was behind him laughed at that question. It was a voice he hadn’t heard before.

“Try to catch me next time, hero.”

The next instant, there was a whoosh and Subaru’s view swung upward and started spinning.

As he flew up into the air horrifically, like a bird with a terribly light body, he realized.

Whoever was behind him had beheaded—

7

"—Subaru! Hey Subaru! Are you okay?"

The connection to his rolling head and the change of perspective were instantaneous.

What greeted Subaru as he awakened on the soft bed of vines was the silvery voice that he hadn't been able to find no matter how much he searched only minutes earlier.

"Emi…lia…"

"Subaru… Thank goodness. You woke up. We were *really* worried."

Weakly opening his eyes, he saw her. She was smiling in relief.

"———"

Emilia's smooth, slender neck was radiant.

His well of emotions still dry, he slowly reached his hands toward her neck. Such a slender neck would easily fit between his two hands.

"? What is it, Subaru?"

Emilia's eyes widened in shock as Subaru put his hands around her neck.

She was surprised but didn't make any move to stop him. If he felt like it, he could use all his strength and snap her neck easily.

Despite his literally holding her life in his hands, her reaction was dull, unresponsive, as if…

"It would seem Subaru is not fully awake yet, I suppose. Rather easygoing for how much we worried."

"—Ngh."

Subaru let go of her neck when he heard the voice right beside him.

Looking over, he saw Beatrice on the edge of the bed with her short arms crossed and looking exasperated.

"True." Emilia nodded wryly. "But if you're just a little groggy, then that's fine. I was so worried it might have been worse… Beatrice was almost in tears when we found you on the ground."

"I wonder if you had to add unnecessary details!"

Beatrice's face went red as she indignantly pouted at Emilia's innocent statement.

The two of them chatting easily didn't understand the impulse that had entranced Subaru moments earlier. They had no idea how dangerous the situation had been.

Their behavior toward Subaru pointed to…

"…So then this is…"

He'd returned to the moment right after «Natsuki Subaru» had lost his memories, or put another way, to the moment when Natsuki Subaru realized he had been summoned into another world.

And also—

"—!"

"—! You…ngh"

Hearing a faint whinny, Subaru spun around and saw it.

The massive black body sitting politely in the corner of the green room—the lizard that had done everything it could for Subaru until the very moment it was swallowed by the shadow was leisurely sitting there.

"…This doesn't feel quite right. It was Betty and Emilia who found him."

"Heh-heh, don't pout. It's fine, isn't it? Subaru and Patrasche are *really* close, after all."

He could hear Emilia and Beatrice behind him, but Subaru didn't respond. He just gave the lizard a massive hug, grateful that it was there, too.

—He was grateful to the one being there who hadn't hurt him.

CHAPTER 4

THE TOWER OF THE LIVING

1

—*Think.*

Think, think, think. You gotta think.

His mind raced as he forced himself to use the knowledge of the future that no one else could have to find the answer, convinced that was the true value of his ability.

“______”

Hanging onto the lizard, feeling the hard, rough scales biting into his skin, Natsuki Subaru’s mind raced.

What happened to him, what was happening inside the tower, whoever was trying to kill him, whoever was trying to kill everyone else, enemies, allies…

“Subaru, look here. Isn’t it about time you calmed down?”

Subaru slowly turned around. Looking back, he saw Beatrice sitting on the edge of the bed of vines.

Emilia sat next to the little girl, holding her hand while Beatrice kicked her legs, glaring at Subaru. His face tensed ever so slightly when he felt her gaze on him.

He felt a terror being the target of a negative emotion, no matter how minor it was—

“Now, now, Beatrice. That’s not a nice way to put it. Subaru’s just out of it from suddenly waking up. You can forgive him clinging to Patrasche a little bit.”

“Betty is not mad. It just doesn’t feel right. You and Betty were both worried about him, too, so why is the land dragon special?”

“Heh-heh. We were worried.”

Emilia patted Beatrice on the head as she looked at Subaru. The sweet affection in her purple eyes pierced Subaru’s heart.

But the unease burbling in his mind reminded him of something he must not forget.

Don’t kid yourself. «Natsuki Subaru» is who they really want.

And there was also the anxiety of knowing he couldn’t shoulder that heavy burden.

But…

“—Umm, I didn’t mean to make you worry. Really. I’m super sorry. Grabbing onto a girl while I’m still groggy isn’t really in character for me and I was just embarrassed.”

Relaxing his face, Subaru put on a smile.

“But Patrasche is a girl, too?”

“Uegh?! No, I mean, Patrasche is special, or more like, we have a bond that’s doesn’t really take that sort of thing into account and it’s like she’s seeded out of the first round.”

“Mrgh, Betty cannot allow that to pass without comment. Betty can’t accept that land dragon alone being treated specially. Betty demands an explanation.”

“Don’t try to put yourself into the same arena with a…um…land dragon!”

Subaru calmly watched the two of their reactions as Beatrice started looking more and more upset. They didn’t seem to react strangely to his response.

Relieved by that, Subaru looked back at the lizard whose neck he was still petting—Patrasche—and nodded.

“…You really are in your own special place, Patrasche.”

“———”

Closing his eyes with that soft murmur, Subaru leaned his forehead against the black land dragon’s head.

“Hey, Subaru. Are you really okay?”

“…Ah, yeah, I’m fine, I’m fine. No problem. Sorry for making you worry. I guess my exhaustion just went over the limit. Falling asleep like that happens all the time.”

“I see…but if you’re tired, you need to say so. Don’t force yourself.”

Subaru spun his arm lightheartedly, acting in good spirits.

“Rodger dodger.”

Answering her reminder with a joke, Subaru pushed his brain into high gear.

He was walking around the fourth floor of the tower with Emilia and Beatrice. They were headed toward the room that was serving as their base to gather for breakfast—just a normal morning scene.

Because this time, Subaru hadn’t told them he lost his memory.

His joy at reuniting with Patrasche in the green room had lasted only a moment before he decided to devise a plan out of the cage he found himself in. Testing a route he hadn’t tried yet.

Hiding his memory loss was part of that test—observing them, playing «Natsuki Subaru» well enough that they didn’t notice. But also, in order to figure out what was going on in this tower and to discover the murderer's true identity.

"This is definitely a tightrope walk, but…"

Reckless would be the kindest way to describe a plan to pass himself off as some complete stranger, but fortunately, he was pretending to be «Natsuki Subaru»—even in a different universe, their roots were the same.

So I should be able to pull it off. I just have to be careful about the various relationships and pretend to be myself.

"The first test is whether losing my memories is what triggered the killer to act."

Twice before, he'd been killed getting pushed off the spiral stairs of the tower. It was a painful memory to bring up, but it was proof that there was a murderer. The problem was the motive.

Why did the murderer kill Subaru, and was it related to him losing his memories?

"Honestly, I can imagine killing someone because they might know something inconvenient…but it's hard to imagine killing someone because they forgot something…"

"—Subaru, you're furrowing your brow again."

"Gah."

Suddenly, he felt a finger poke him in the forehead, bringing him back to reality.

Between Emilia looking a little peeved and the feeling of her finger, Subaru caught his breath.

He'd thought it before, but her closeness with him was a little bit too much for him to take. This time, he'd even put his hands around her neck when he woke up, and yet she didn't even comment on it.

"What did I do to get her this close to me…"

Did I turn into some massive playboy before I lost my memories? Or is she just abnormally friendly despite her scary good looks? She probably grew up in a bubble of love, so she doesn't really have any sense of boundaries with other people.

Once he imagined she was a sheltered girl who never had to work hard to get things, he could see her ending up the way she was…or maybe it was all just a front, and she was actually hiding the darkness in her heart.

"———"

The two of them were the only ones in the main party whose corpse he hadn't seen last time, making them his top suspects.

Of course, the voice of the mysterious person who had beheaded him didn't belong to Beatrice or Emilia, but that didn't mean one or both of them weren't working with an accomplice.

"Try to catch me next time, hero."

There was a chance one or both of them were working with that person in order to kill everyone in the tower…

“Barusu, quit spacing out and help get some water.”

“Whoops, sorry.”

Yet again, a voice interrupted his thoughts. Hurriedly looking around, he saw Ram’s pink eyes narrowed, looking at him suspiciously.

She was making the preparations for breakfast in the room where everyone was gathered. When Subaru entered the room, she pushed a bucket into his hand and watched him.

“…I heard from Lady Emilia that you slept in the archive upstairs. Could you refrain from further acts of stupidity? It’s a burden on those around you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m thinking about what I did. Sorry for making you worry, too.”

“Me? Worry about you? Why?”

“In case anything happened to me, I guess!”

Ram just snorted and turned back to her work. Subaru’s heart ached some seeing her slender back.

“Urgh.”

The nausea that swelled in that moment was because Ram’s last moment was seared into his mind—when she’d been hit from behind by some grisly attack.

Honestly, I deserve an Oscar for managing not to show how shocked I felt seeing her alive again after that horrible death scene. And a standing ovation for playing «Natsuki Subaru» well enough not to make them suspicious.

However, he’d failed to notice the look on Ram’s face when she first saw Subaru because of that.

“Uwaaah! Smells good! A wonderful morning with a luxuriant meal and of course with Master, too!”

As Subaru regretted his failure with Ram, he heard the next visitor to the room come in with a loud voice.

It was the woman with long black hair tied up in the back and her voluptuous body almost entirely on display—and this time, her head was still connected to the rest of her body.

Looking cheerfully at Subaru, she rushed over like a happy puppy.

“Bonjour, Master! Sleep well last night?”

She was beaming as she hugged Subaru tightly against her chest.

“Ugh…”

“I know I did! I had a dream for the first time in a long time. You were there, and Mom, and—”

“I get it, I get it. I’ll listen to you dream more later… Did you notice anything when you saw me this morning?”

"? This morning? You're a lady-killer like always! It's four hundred years now I've been waiting for a proposition!"

"Talk about patient… If you didn't notice anything, then it's fine."

Slipping free from her arms, he fled from her excessive need for skinship. She didn't seem to mind, though, looking ecstatic at his answer.

Next was Meili who was yawning, and even later Echidna and Julius together. *She hasn't revealed her situation yet, so I have to be careful to treat her like she's Anastasia.*

But then, Subaru noticed something.

"———"

When Julius followed Echidna in, the moment he saw Subaru, his face tensed. He looked away from Subaru and distanced himself. Seeing that extreme reaction, Subaru quietly licked his lips.

"—Shaula, I've got a request for you."

He whispered to her as she looked excitedly at all the food being set out, never taking his eyes off Julius, who had behaved so unnaturally…

2

—Breakfast was all about explaining Echidna and Anastasia’s situation.

While watching the others’ surprised reactions, Subaru pretended it was his first time hearing it while feeling a bit intrigued at how things developed when there was no discussion about his memories being lost.

Even though he’d experienced this morning for the fourth time, he still didn’t have a solid grasp on the unique characteristics of his ability. He had constantly been buffeted by everything going on around him, and this was the first time he could experience a new start after having finally reobtaining a modicum of calm.

Most likely, my return by death is the same as the standard time leap setting where the events in the world flow the same every time other than whatever I happen to influence.

It made sense that unlike the other times where his memory loss had been a topic, this time the focus was entirely on Echidna.

What he learned from that was that a dramatic difference would require him to act. Fate wasn’t going to change unless he took a proactive approach.

So…

“I’d like to talk to you about last night. Face-to-face, just the two of us.”

“———”

When Subaru said that, Julius’s reaction was bigger than expected.

With the breakfast discussion over, everyone was left to their own devices for a short break before taking on the next floor when Subaru called Julius out.

Julius’s yellow eyes were filled with a swirl of heavy emotions when he heard Subaru, which made Subaru all the more confident in his deduction.

“Come on, let’s go somewhere else.”

“…Understood.”

Nodding at Subaru’s invitation, Julius looked resolute as he followed. The two of them left the base camp and picked another room on the fourth floor for their secret discussion.

Anywhere works, as long as no one gets in the way. A place for a duel.

“Let’s talk about last night.”

The room was not very large, and Subaru was facing off against Julius with just a few feet between them.

He was a little bit nervous, but he didn't want to let on to that. At present, he had more advantages on his side, but that was something that could get flipped easily depending on how things developed.

And more than anything, the crux of what he'd called Julius out on, what happened last night, was something Subaru couldn't remember.

—But most likely, something happened between us in the archive last night. And that something is what led to my memories being stolen.

That was why he looked so tense when he saw me this morning.

"About last night, huh… I thought we already finished our conversation at the time. Did you have more?"

"…Yeah, I did. I'm not satisfied one little bit with it."

Subaru aligned his story with Julius's, who had averted his eyes while answering.

Julius's voice was monotone, careful not to be more emotional than necessary. But that wasn't going to work for Subaru. He needed him to get emotional. So in order to provoke that, he latched on hard.

Julius quietly sighed at Subaru's tenacious grip.

"Satisfaction, eh? I see. That complaint is certainly like you. My feelings are secondary so that you may resolve your own problem as soon as possible? Is that not just a little bit too selfish?"

"That's not what I want to talk about. Yeah, I'm not satisfied, but you sure as hell don't look okay, either. If the both of us are both holding onto something pissing us off, you expect me to just pretend there's nothing going on? Screw that!"

"What other choice is there?"

Responding tit for tat, hiding that he had no receipts to back up what he was saying, Subaru continued to aggressively push Julius, and his emotions were gradually starting to show.

Subaru wanted to know what choice there was, too.

What did we argue about last night, and what came of it? And if there was a choice not to do that, what would that have led to?

"My feelings are the same as I stated last night, and I have nothing further to say. Because I wasn't even able to notice your secret dealings with Lady Anastasia…with Echidna."

"My…secret with Echidna…"

That revelation came out of nowhere. This time it was Subaru who was caught off-guard.

It was a strange story. To the best of his knowledge, he was a member of the group centered around Emilia, while Julius and Echidna—or rather Anastasia, the rightful owner of the body Echidna was inhabiting—were part of a rival faction.

For Echidna to be in secret communication with Subaru of all people was…

"I understand that you didn't do it out of malice. And I won't say it was enough, but I spoke quite a bit with Echidna as well. She can be trusted…or rather, there is no choice but to trust her."

"———"

"In order to save Lady Anastasia, there is nothing to be done but to gamble on that possibility… Even if she still does not remember me after we recover her."

Julius lowered his gaze, an awful, hoarse loneliness in his voice.

Subaru had heard the situation that Julius was dealing with. How just like Ram's sister who was sleeping and the large number of people waiting for them to get back, he'd been hit with a curse that made him forgotten by everyone else.

Even if Echidna managed to return to Anastasia control of her body, it was likely she wouldn't remember her own knight Julius.

"But even so, what I must do remains the same. I do not know what you want to hear from me, so allow me to make that clear now."

"…What…?"

"I implore you…do not make me more miserable in your presence."

Subaru couldn't immediately respond to that frail voice.

But he could feel his heart growing terribly disordered and he fell silent. Seeing that reaction from Subaru, Julius shook his head, as if giving up.

"It seems that to continue any further would be of no value."

Julius turned away and started to leave the room. But just before he stepped through the door, he stopped for a moment without turning back.

"I was a little scared when you brought up last night. I wondered what I should do if you were to apologize."

"If I…apologized…?"

"I wonder what I would have said. But I suppose I will never know."

With those self-deprecating words, Julius left the room.

Watching until his back passed out of sight, Subaru let out a long breath. Suddenly, he felt tired, like he was carrying a heavy burden on his shoulders, and he broke into a sweat.

He felt like he had become a loathsome person.

"—Master, was that good?"

And taking Julius's place, Shaula showed her face, peeking into the room. Subaru relaxed his shoulders seeing her easygoing expression.

Putting his hand on his forehead, he shook his head.

"Yeah, that's good. From that, it looks like Julius had nothing to do with the archive… But there is still something between him and yesterday’s me.”

“Doesn’t make sense to me, but was I useful at least?”

“…Yeah, you were. Thanks to you, I can face Julius without worrying.”

“Ehehehe, that’s good then. So, so, so then Master… Master…”

Her cheeks flushed and she shuddered in joy as she walked over to him. Spreading her arms nervously…

“Could you give me a big hug as a reward?”

“I don’t want to.”

“Ehhh?! How mean! You said if it didn’t go past the level of a treat, you would be willing to do what I asked?!”

“That request is too much for my pure heart…”

Though he was ignoring her request for excessive intimacy, it was still true that she’d provided an important insurance for his meeting with Julius. He’d had her hide in the next room over, in case anything happened.

He’d thought she would be likely to help him without asking too many details, and as the first corpse he had found last time, he thought she was the least likely of the suspects.

And in actual fact, she hadn’t asked for any details and didn’t seem to be bothered at all.

Either way…

“I still don’t know who stole my memories, huh…”

It wasn’t as if he knew for sure that Julius was innocent, but now there was a clear line between him and the others. It was obvious something had happened between him and Subaru the previous night, but there was no evidence to link that to the memory loss. And more than anything, the grief in Julius’s eyes was genuine.

If that’s an act, then there’s nothing I can do.

He didn’t know what motive «Natsuki Subaru» had for his secret with Echidna, but at the very least Subaru had more than enough reason to be suspicious of what the past him had done that night.

“What were you doing, «Natsuki Subaru», and who is after you…”

“Ah, Master! Um, if a hug won’t work, then what about if you jump into my open arms instead? I can hug you with my boing-boing body.”

“That’s too much for my pure heart, too.”

“So mean, Master!”

When it comes to questions, another good one is: Why is her affection level so damn high?

Why was she so attached to Subaru? The others in the group didn’t know, either, and they simply explained that he was just using her because it was convenient, but…*was that really it?*

“———”

The secret with Echidna, the suspicious actions that night, and even just the relationships with the rest of the group—even accounting for the fact that they couldn't talk, «Natsuki Subaru» was the biggest unknown of them all to Subaru.

What could he possibly have been thinking? But there was no way of getting that answer.

"Looks like I've hit a wall here…maybe I should go see Patrasche."

"Hm? That land dragon? It glares at me, so I don't really like it."

"I won't forgive anyone badmouthing Patrasche. Even if this world forgives badmouthing, I won't ever forgive talking bad about Patrasche."

"How badly does that land dragon have you by the balls?!"

Shaula squealed at Subaru's menacing look, but on that point alone, he wasn't going to brook any argument.

He couldn't forget how Patrasche had risked her life in order to save him in the last run. The biggest ally he had there was without a doubt Patrasche.

That was why he wanted to work out his plan going forward while resting his heart at Patrasche's side.

"Anyway, you and I are splitting up now. I'll see you later."

"Ugh, what about my treat? I'm not going to give in. Being a convenient woman for you is my raison d'être!"

"———"

Shaula saluted sharply as he tried to leave the room. Hearing that, he was taken aback by her volunteering for something like that.

"…What about Natsuki Subaru is worth going that far?"

"? Master?"

"—Argh, damn it!"

Unable to contain the annoyance welling up inside him, Subaru spun around, walked over to her as she stood stock-still, and wrapped his arms tightly around her slender body.

"—Ah."

"You don't have to think of yourself as just some convenient woman. I was wrong."

He was on the verge of one-sidedly using her like a tool, just like «Natsuki Subaru». Not wanting to be like that, he hugged her tighter.

Shaula stiffened momentarily in his arms. Then her pale skin, cheeks, and ears quickly turned red.

"Mas…ter…"

"You being here helped… That's all."

With that, Subaru let her go, deciding that was enough.

It was embarrassing, but the sense of achievement won out. He didn't want to turn into the selfish sort of guy who would just keep relying on others. He didn’t want to become like «Natsuki Subaru».

“Master…”

Looking at him, Shaula’s cheeks were red as she unsteadily moved closer to him. Her eyes were damp and there was a heat on her breath as she looked at Subaru’s lips.

“You finally fell for—”

“Too close!”

“Guh!”

Pushing her chin away, Subaru brought Shaula back to reality.

3

"A good woman knows when to quit. A secret makes a woman."

With that, Shaula backed down.

Honestly, it was too annoying to come up with a retort for that, so he just let her have the last word.

"Sometimes, it's better not to know."

Either way, beneath the surface of that tension-breaking scene, Subaru's situation wasn't exactly great.

He'd hoped that the truth of how he lost his memory would be made clear by confronting Julius, but he had been wrong, and his investigation was back at square one.

No one other than Julius had reacted strangely during the morning. The one thing he hadn't noticed, Ram's initial reaction, had been missed due to his lack of composure, but…

"If that performance was fake, then I don't know what I can believe…"

The way Ram had refused to believe it when she heard Subaru had lost his memory. If her tearful plea when he forgot her sister was a lie, then there was nothing he could believe.

But if he couldn't trust anything, then he couldn't start to suspect anything, either. So for the moment, the one fundamental connection that he could believe in…

"…is Patrasche… Talk about a complete misanthrope."

Even he was exasperated by his conclusion, but it didn't change the fact that that was how it seemed.

It's one thing if it's just other people, but the misanthropy is terminal once you stop being able to trust even yourself.

"Maybe it'd be better to just live in a land dragon–only paradise with Patrasche."

"—Ahh, I heard that."

"Uegh?!"

The moment he said that out loud, a girl leapt out from around the corner. Her dark blue hair bounced as she giggled teasingly.

Subaru's shoulders slumped when he realized someone overheard his lame joke.

"Do you want to run some place far away with Patrasche, mister? Giggle. Beatrice and big sis would cry if they heard that."

"It was just a bad joke. On multiple levels, I'd appreciate it if you just forgot about it."

"Okaaay. But if that was how you really felt, I wouldn't laugh at you, mister. I told you how I spent so long living with my cute demon beasts, right?"

"Cute demon beasts… Sort of like being raised by wolves?"

"I told you yesterday."

Subaru was honestly shocked when she didn't even deny the raised-by-wolves bit. Judging from the fact that they could talk like they did, combined with her bearing and mannerisms, she must have had some degree of education. She didn't really feel like a wolf girl.

"Mama was strict. Also I was with Elsa a lot, and she was weirdly sloppy, so I had to take care of a lot of things."

"Ahh, wait, wait, wait, my head's going to burst with all of this… I'd love to keep playing with you, but I'm kind of busy at the moment. Shaula should be nearby, so just hang out with her."

"The half-naked lady? That would be fine, but right now I need you for something, mister."

"Me?"

Not particularly interested in Meili's family situation, Subaru tried to end the conversation when he was hit by a surprise request. But he wasn't that against it. In his head, Meili was comparable to Shaula in being easier to talk to.

Probably because she was less reliant on «Natsuki Subaru», unlike Emilia and Beatrice and the others, so he felt less guilty for lying to her.

"Well, if you want to talk, I can listen. What's up?"

"About that."

Because of that comfort, he decided to lend her an ear. She nodded and holding her hands behind her back, she leaned forward, and with a gaze that was almost coquettish, she licked her red lips…

"—About last night, how seriously should I take what you said?"

Still smiling sweetly, she broke the ice.

× × ×

"—Oww!"

Feeling a sudden, sharp pain, Subaru reflexively grimaced.

Both of his arms hurt. Looking down to see what happened, he gasped. There were painful scratches all over both wrists and the back of both hands.

"Ughhh, what happened…"

The scratches looked deep, and blood was slowly welling up. Seeing them made the pain assert itself even more intensely. Honestly, it was enough to make his eyes water.

It was almost as if someone had scratched him…

"…Huh? What am I doing…"

Doubt filled his mind.

After breakfast, I called Julius out. After that was the farce with Shaula, and then Meili popped up while I was on my way to Patrasche…

"—Ah?"

Looking around for something to take care of his hands, Subaru noticed something strange. And in the sense of being not at all what he would have imagined, it was certainly strange.

"———"

A slender leg was splayed on the floor.

The leg was limp and unmoving. Moving his gaze, he followed the leg slowly upward, seeing a skirt, and then an upper body, and then…

—It was a girl lying there, not moving at all.

"—Huh?"

—Meili was lying there, dead.

4

Meili was dead, sprawled across the middle of the stone floor in an unremarkable room.

“——”

Looking down at her corpse, Subaru’s mind was chaos.

The wounds on his hands and wrists, an empty room, and his heart racing. He tried to remember what happened, but nothing came. His mind was blank, and he couldn’t understand anything.

The only thing he could say for sure was that girl lying in front of him was dead—

“No…way…no way! This can’t be happening!”

He ran over to her body, as if to deny the reality before his eyes.

His knees quivered and he tripped pathetically before frantically peering into her face. Her expression was twisted in pain and her lifeless eyes were looking somewhere in the distance.

She’d always been a hard-to-read girl, but now she would forever be incomprehensible—

“N-not yet…Meili! C’mon, Meili!”

Hoping against all hope, he called out to her. There was no response. He slapped her face. Still no reaction.

He called on all the memory he had of CPR. Trusting the vague recollections of the heart’s location, he put two fingers below her sternum and then placed both hands on her small chest, beginning a series of forceful chest compressions in order to revive her.

“Hah…hah…! Meili! C’mon, Meili! Damn it…!”

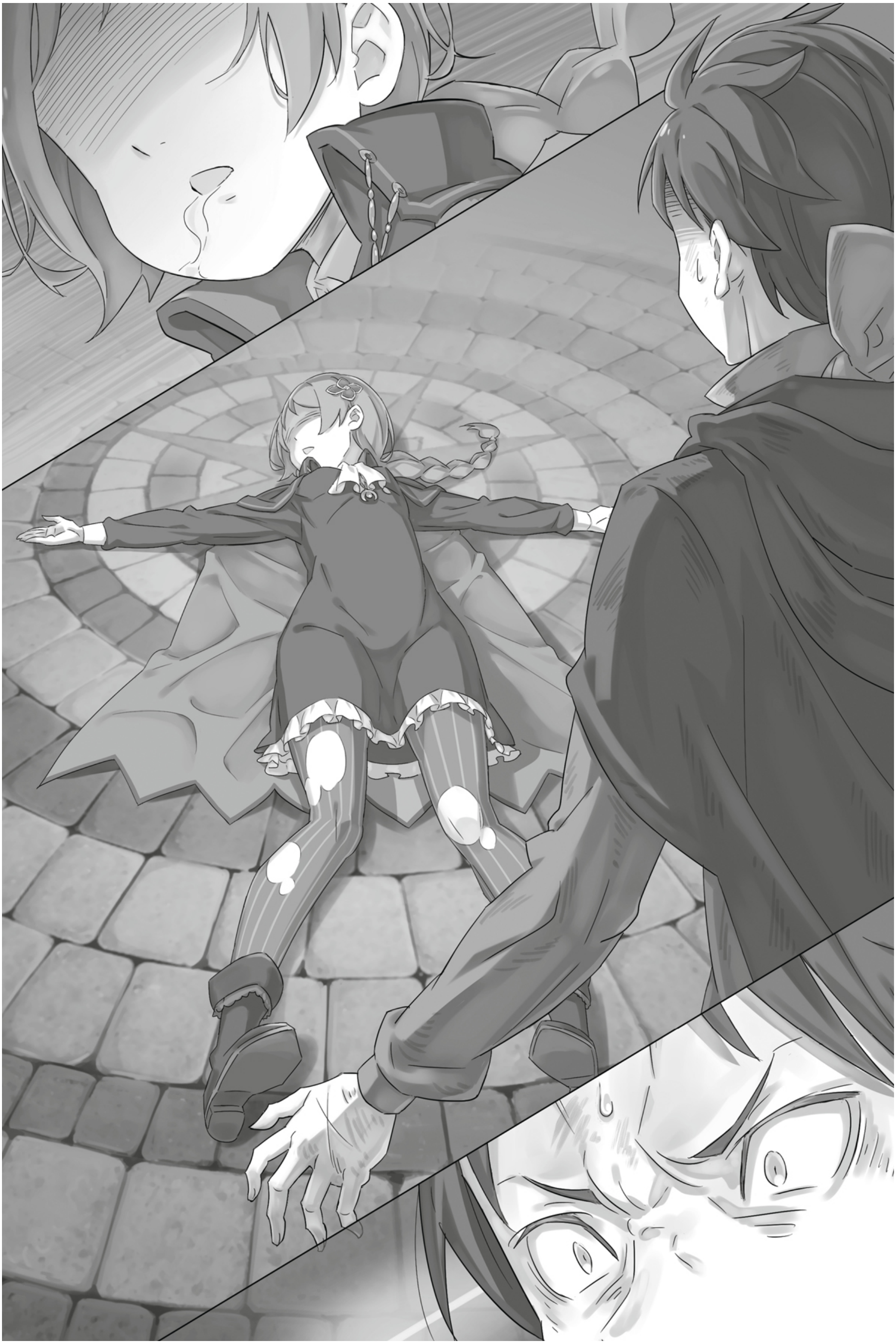
There was no response. Her pale face and limp body shuddered beneath him.

He tilted her head backward and started rescue breathing. He continued alternating compressions with rescue breathing.

“What was next? What next? Is there anything else? Shit, shit, shit, shit!”

Subaru’s mind raced as he tried to remember anything else.

But all he could remember was half-assed stuff from TV shows, just bits and pieces of vague outlines. The more desperate he got, the more futile it felt.



He kept blindly cycling between compressions and rescue breathing, cycling and cycling and cycling…

"—Goddamn it…"

Sweaty and breathing raggedly, Subaru fell backward onto the floor. Mortified, he covered his teary eyes with his hand and cursed everything.

He hadn't been able to resuscitate Meili. The fire of life wouldn't be lit again.

All that "her life was brutally stolen by a merciless fate" crap isn't going to fly here.

It wasn't fate that had killed her. There was a more direct and targeted danger that was responsible. As proof, there were still dark-blue bruises circling her neck from where she was strangled, and also…

"———"

There were lots of scratches on his hands and wrists from Meili struggling.

"—Ugh…"

The moment he realized that, Subaru looked away, vomiting up everything he had eaten at breakfast. That he managed to look away and not get it on Meili was thanks to the last fragments of his conscience.

"All I'm doing is blowing chunks everywhere…"

He wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

I don't even remember how many times I've thrown up anymore. Have I properly digested something even once? I'm sorry to all the farmers who made this food.

If he hadn't distracted himself a little with that pointless internal banter, his heart might well have broken right then and there.

"———"

There was too much circumstantial evidence. And he couldn't imagine someone framing him with such an elaborate setup, either.

The ghastly bruises on her neck perfectly matched where his hands would sit. There was no other weapon used than those two hands—it was undoubtedly Subaru who had killed her.

The problem was he couldn't remember anything like that happening.

"What happened? Try to remember. Focus. Focus, focus, focus…"

Standing up, he started walking in circles around the room as he delved into memories.

I went through the same morning for the fourth time, lied to everyone at the breakfast table, called out Julius but found out my theory was wrong, messed around some with Shaula, and then talked to Meili. And *then…*

“She said something…about last night…?”

She mentioned needing me for something, and then brought up something about last night, I think. But right after she said that, everything went blank.

His memory stopped there, and then she was dead, as if a second act had started without any logical connection to the first.

Even though the subject she’d brought up—what had happened the night before—might have had some connection with Subaru’s lost memory.

“She’s dead. And I wrung her neck…? Why would I…?”

Looking down at his hands, he experienced a vivid feeling in them that he couldn’t remember.

The two hands that had forcefully wrung the breath out of that little girl’s neck. The scratches on his hands were the proof that she’d struggled to live. The arms that had committed such a brutal murder…

“—Huh?”

Looking at the bloody wounds on his arms, he had a strange felling.

The reason was not the wounds, but his fingers. For some reason, there was blood and flesh in his nails, just like Meili’s, indicating he had scratched hard at something, too.

“———”

Looking at Meili’s body again, he saw no wounds other than the bruises on her neck. He didn’t strip her to check everywhere, but he couldn’t see any obvious scratch marks.

In which case, this is from…

“—No way…”

A chill ran down his spine as he rolled up his own sleeve.

His left arm was aching, and when he pushed the sleeve up to his shoulder, he heard the sticky sound of dried blood peeling away and the new pain of an open wound exposed to air.

But the pain was erased by the shock of the sight he found.

“———”

As he imagined, there was a wound that seemed to have been clawed into his arm by himself. There was a painful wound scratched into his arm from the inner elbow and up the upper arm. But it wasn’t just any scratch.

They were letters. A twisted writing carved into his body.

—And it said, “Natsuki Subaru was here.”

“Huh?”

He couldn’t help making a baffled sound when he saw it.

Wiping the wound with his right hand, he wondered if it was just his mind playing tricks on him that he read it that way. But even after rubbing at it enough to cause the blood to start oozing out again, the fact did not change.

No matter how many times he looked at it, the words "Natsuki Subaru was here" were written there in a grisly Japanese.

It was easy to understand. Just a simple self-assertion. Some criminals liked to leave messages at the scenes of their crimes. To claim the crime, say who had committed it.

It was a gift, ambition, self-gratification…

"What are you?!"

Face-to-face with a difficult-to-accept reality, Subaru's voice cracked. He couldn't cut off his own left arm, so he flung it out to keep it as far from himself as possible, but his feet got tangled and he fell backward. Sitting on the ground, he slammed his arm into the ground over and over and over again.

But none of that changed the facts. Meili was dead and the wounds on his arm did not disappear.

"I didn't have this before! I definitely didn't have this before! I know I didn't!"

The aching scratches were new, something he absolutely hadn't had before Meili's death. Someone strangled Meili and then did this to his arm…

No, that's not it. That's wrong and you know it. Just accept it already. Wrap your head around it. You already know there isn't anyone else here.

This wasn't Subaru's crime. «Natsuki Subaru» had killed Meili and carved the evidence into his arm.

"What's going on…?"

I'm going crazy. I have to be.

Is «Natsuki Subaru» the name of some incomprehensible monster?

"———"

This wasn't the first time he had felt suspicious of «Natsuki Subaru».

The actions he'd seemingly taken the night he had lost his memories, the secret with Echidna that had been kept from Julius, and the number of things he'd apparently done in order to earn people's trust would have been impossible for the Natsuki Subaru who'd just been on his way home from the convenience store.

Had he been told that someone was passing himself off as Natsuki Subaru and had taken over his body to do the deed, it would almost sound more believable.

"But that isn't it…"

The wound carved in his left arm argued against that theory.

Even if it wasn't made with a pen, there were still quirks to the writing style. The strokes of the letters, where they started and ended

—it all matched the quirks of his handwriting.

Meaning it was unmistakably a «Natsuki Subaru» with the same roots as him who had written the message.

In which case, while he was leaving this note…

"—I was unconscious, and «Natsuki Subaru» switched places with me?"

And that «Natsuki Subaru» killed Meili for some reason, then left his signature on Subaru's arm before slipping back beneath the surface.

It might at least work as a theory, but he couldn't understand what the motive could possibly be.

"If he has his own body, then why…no, what am I? If you're «Natsuki Subaru», then what am I…? Who are you…?"

Clutching his face, Subaru's voice quivered as he sank into a morass of questions and doubt.

Thrown into another world with no one to rely on, no way of knowing who was friend and who was foe, now he could no longer even trust himself unconditionally.

"———"

He couldn't stay calm. His legs trembled and he almost collapsed on the spot.

But I'm not gonna let it end like this. I'm not just gonna let myself be manipulated by «Natsuki Subaru's» plans.

So…

"—Who…are you?"

Bristling with malice as he addressed someone he couldn't see without a mirror, Subaru raised his right arm, covered in a grotesque pattern and fleshed out from a year's time he couldn't remember, and put his fingernails against it.

The dark flesh tore, and a drop of red blood welled up like a teardrop.

—The stabbing pain and the color of fresh blood were proof that he was himself.

5

“———”

Keeping quiet and watching for any sign of someone in the hallway, Subaru slowly left the room.

Behind him in the room, he’d done the barest minimum to hide Meili’s corpse. He carried her into a corner and draped a little bit of cloth that had been in the room over her body as a makeshift camouflage.

The way he nervously crept out of the room was the epitome of suspicious, and if anyone had been there to see it, he wouldn’t have had any excuse. If they checked the room, then it would be even harder to defend himself.

“There isn’t any defense anyway… The murder weapon used to kill her was my two hands.”

I don’t know what the trial standard is in this world, but any jury who saw Meili’s fingers and the scratches on my hands would come back with a guilty verdict for sure.

He had no idea how to fight that, so he had no choice but to hide her body.

He didn’t convince himself he was right or that it was the best choice he could make, but there wasn’t anything else he could do. There was one thing he could say, though…

“If we meet again…you’re off the list of suspects, Meili.”

He’d seen her corpse both this time and the last time.

It’s safe to say the suspicion over her is pretty much cleared. Not that that means anything to her now that she’s dead.

It was a standard mystery trope: only the dead could be discounted as suspects.

But Subaru had assumed the detective role and he possessed the genre-breaking ability to return after he died. With that, he could respond to any situation, and no matter how hopeless he actually was, he would end up looking like a genius detective. But…

“The detective being the criminal is another classic mystery trope.”

In this case, the killer is another personality of the detective—an old cliché. In those cases, the detective could always just throw themselves off a cliff to resolve things. But that’s out too with Return by Death gumming up the works.

The incident was unresolved. *Or I guess you could say it’s re: unsolved…*

“Is this really the time for that?! I’ve gotta get…”

"—Ah, Subaru! So this is where you were."

"—Ngh?!"

Twitching, he spun around to see Emilia coming over to him. She cocked her head when she saw him tense at her little dash.

"Sorry, did I surprise you?"

"…Ye…ah. Yeah, a bit, but well, whatever. It was a little sudden, is all. I'm totally fine. What's up, Emilia-chan?"

"? I was walking around the tower some to see if something would come to me… Hey, Subaru…"

"Yeah?"

"Are you teasing me or something?"

Subaru gulped at her curiosity.

Looking into her beautiful, gleaming purple eyes, he couldn't tell what she was after. He couldn't be sure that he had managed to successfully feign calm, but he did think his answer wasn't unnatural.

At the very least he hadn't done anything to draw her attention to the room behind him.

I hope.

"______"

Emilia looked at him with her big, round eyes.

Her cute face that seemed completely incapable of scheming wasn't enough to remove her from suspicion. When the tower had been annihilated in the last cycle, Emilia and Beatrice were the only people he hadn't been able to find. Even if «Natsuki Subaru» acting behind the scenes could resolve the mystery of Meili's death, it didn't definitively answer anything else.

Someone else had killed Shaula, Echidna, Ram, Julius, and Meili, used the shadow's power in order to collapse the tower, and then laughed while taking Subaru's head.

It was still possible that that unknown person was an accomplice of Emilia's.

"Subaru, are you okay? Are you sure you're not pushing yourself?"

"I-It's fine. I was just lost in thought a bit… You're really staring hard at me."

"Mm-hmm. I am. It seems like, when I notice it, I've been looking at you a lot lately… I don't really understand it, but it's kind of mysterious."

He let Emilia reach out and touch his forehead as she smiled ever so slightly. He was cautious of her every move, but there wasn't a trace of malice or animosity in her actions.

There was no sign of her revealing her true nature when given an opening, either.

Or maybe she really wasn't hiding anything. Maybe she really was worried about him and was just a super cute girl like she seemed to be.

If she really doesn't know anything…how would she react if I unloaded every last thing? Just totally spilled my guts. How much better would I feel watching that sheltered, pretty little face without a care in the world wrinkle up?

—If I told her the Natsuki Subaru she's so worried about is nowhere to be found.

—Or better yet, if I told her he's a brutal, evil murderer.

"—Oh yeah, about Meili."

"—Ngh!"

Caught off guard, Subaru's eyes widened, and he made a strange sound in his throat.

He hadn't managed to hide the obviously suspicious reaction. But Emilia had looked down at the floor—no, more than that, at the tower itself.

"Ram might get upset and say we're getting ahead of ourselves, but…if we make it back safely from this tower, I want to really do right by Meili."

"Right…"

"What she did a year ago was bad, and I understand Otto saying not to blindly trust her…but she was the reason we were able to get through the desert, and if she really intended to do something else bad, she had plenty of opportunities already on the way here, right?"

Holding onto the sleeves of her outfit, Emilia started spilling what she'd been thinking.

Meili's position in the party—he had heard from others and even Meili herself that she had been a killer hired to assassinate Subaru and Emilia and her group. And that she failed that mission and had been captured but was brought along on this trip to make use of her special ability.

"So a pardon or something?"

"If I said I wanted to let her be free, I think everyone would be against it. But I at least want to let her out of the basement cell so she can live with everyone else."

"———"

"Of course, that has to come after talking to her and confirming she wants that, too."

Emilia stuck her little tongue out as she asked for Subaru's opinion.

Most likely she'd only brought it to him after some serious thought on her part. She wanted to reward what Meili had done. That was the only thought she had as she pondered what to do.

—Not knowing that Meili had died painfully while being choked to death.

"…So stupid…"

"Eh?"

"I said it was stupid. You know it yourself, don't you? Getting ahead of yourself? You're damn straight. Right now…in this situation, we can't be worrying about later."

His knowledge of Meili's death made Emilia's thoughtfulness feel ridiculous. And the uncomfortable truth engraved in his arms made him snap back. Of course, he immediately regretted the emotional outburst. It had been a spur-of-the-moment thing that not only hurt Emilia but, of all things, unnecessarily drew more suspicion to him.

Hit with that unreasonable and childish outburst—

"Subaru!"

"Bgh."

"What was that? Even if you're in a bad mood, you shouldn't say things like that."

He froze up in anticipation only for Emilia's response to come from an entirely unexpected angle.

She squeezed his cheeks between her hands, not letting him escape from the embarrassment. Her pupils looked straight into his as she earnestly continued.

"If it hurts, then talk to someone! Don't sulk! Beatrice or I will always listen to whatever you have to say. If something's bothering you, then it can bother both of us together. But stop trying to hold it all in. Don't get all worked up by yourself and try to solve things alone. That's just like what Roswaal did when he was bad, too. Don't try to copy it."

Emilia was talking to him with all her heart. Letting his face go, she pulled his head to her, hugging him to her chest and gently patting him.

"Can you tell? My heart isn't mad at all. I won't get disappointed, either. Just talk to me."

"———"

Past the soft feeling and the warmth, he could sense the rhythmic beating of her heart.

It was so gentle, like a lullaby to soothe a baby, and it made him gasp. A deep, powerful shame welled in his head.

After everything she had done, after he said something so terrible, she was still so kind.

What was the point of suspecting her, of recklessly trying to hurt her?

—Is there really someone plotting to kill me?

—What if my dying like that was just an accident?

—What if it wasn't intentional? What if someone tripped and pushed

me while falling?

What if there wasn't anyone bad in the tower?

What if the darkest, ugliest, most dangerous person there was Natsuki Subaru or «Natsuki Subaru»? The foolish visitor from a distant land who wasn't supposed to be there in the first place.

"Emilia…I…"

"—Mm-hmm."

"I…"

He didn't know where to begin.

But he thought about saying it, coming clean, laying it all bare.

Losing his memories, what happened with Meili, how time leapt backward when he died.

She might not believe it all. But she also might. And if she did believe it, they might be able to find a way out.

And if they could at least find that, then he—

"—Lady Emilia! Barusu!"

It was the moment he tried to wring something out of his crumpled brain.

A sharp, urgent voice cut in, blotting out Subaru's anguish. With Emilia still holding him, over his head, he heard her say:

"Ram? What is it? I'm having a *really* important conversation with Subaru right now…"

"I can tell just by looking, but…please put it on hold. There is an urgent matter."

"O-okay…"

Emilia nodded and let Subaru go. He rubbed the heat at the corner of his eyes away and turned to face Ram. It was embarrassing being seen in so pathetic a state, but Ram didn't comment on it. Her face was tense and her eyes serious as she addressed them.

"Please come quickly to the third-floor archive. Lady Beatrice has discovered something grave."

"Beatrice has?"

Ram nodded at Emilia's stunned response, and then she turned away from them.

"Lady Anastasia…or rather Echidna? We must find her and Julius. Barusu, you stay with Lady Emilia."

"Y-yeah, got it…"

Her demeanor brooked no argument, and Subaru just nodded, caught flat-footed. Ram didn't wait to see their response before dashing past them. Stunned by what had happened, Subaru looked back at Emilia.

"Umm, I know what Ram just said…"

"—Let's hurry. Ram was that serious. Something big must have happened."

“———”

“Subaru, I haven’t forgotten what I said before.”

“…Yeah…”

Subaru weakly nodded and went along.

To tell the truth, when she hugged him, he’d intended to just tell her everything. But he had missed his timing, completely derailing that plan. Instead, he followed Emilia who was hurrying up to Taygeta.

Rushing up the long stairs, they were greeted by a massive collection of books of the dead.

“—You’ve come.”

Beatrice was standing in front of the stairs to greet them, the shelves filled with books at her back.

Crossing her arms, she sighed as if exhausted.

“Beatrice, Ram called us here. You found something grave?”

“It is certainly not something that could be called good news. If anything, it should probably be called a terrible omen.”

Beatrice shook her head and then turned her blue eyes toward Subaru.

“Betty has been investigating the archive here since this morning. Because of how you collapsed here, but also because it’s not entirely dissimilar to the forbidden archive in design, Betty decided to analyze this space.”

“…Save the preamble. What happened? Just tell us.”

His breath was a little ragged from running up the stairs, so Subaru nudged her to the point.

Beatrice closed her eyes for a moment, and then slowly pointed to one of the shelves diagonally behind her.

“The book three shelves from the top and furthest to the right.”

“Third shelf…”

“And furthest right.”

Following Beatrice’s directions, Subaru and Emilia moved to the shelf.

It was stuffed with books, and the spines had titles written in this world’s script that he couldn’t read. As always, it just looked like patterns.

So he couldn’t read the title of the book Beatrice had pointed them to.

At the very least, it being in this archive would mean it is a book of the dead…

“It can’t be…”

Emilia gasped beside him.

Glancing over at her, his face tensed when he saw her shock.

It was a terrible shock, followed by a delayed but still swift wail.

What could have shaken her heart that badly?

While he felt her intense reaction was a bit much, her lips trembled.

She said it, with a terribly trembling voice…

“Meili Portroute.”

INTERLUDE

MEILI PORTROUTE

1

—Meili Portroute.

When Emilia said that, Subaru was dumbstruck. He couldn't read the title written on the spine of the book she was looking at, but there was no reason for her to try to pointlessly shake him like that.

In which case the book of the dead in front of him really was referring to her.

"______"

A bead of sweat trickled down his back as he tensed nervously.

Inside his skull, the one and only word his brain could manage was *why*.

Why was Meili's book of the dead there? Why had it appeared on the shelf so quickly? Why had her book been so easily found in an ocean of books? Why did this have to happen when he decided to try trusting Emilia, when he wanted to come clean about everything?

Why was fate so merciless to him?

"—Beatrice, did you read this book?"

As a barrage of *whys* filled Subaru's thoughts, Emilia spoke up. She was still staring at the book of the dead as she questioned Beatrice.

Hearing that question, a hopeless possibility crossed his mind.

—From what I heard, by reading the book of the dead, it was possible to experience the memories of the person whose name was the title of the book. So with Meili's book, her last moment should be recorded in it.

There would be unshakeable evidence of who killed her in her memories.

"______"

Meili had been strangled by «Natsuki Subaru».

Subaru didn't doubt that fact at all, but he was also the only one who could tell the difference between himself and «Natsuki Subaru». There was no reason to expect Meili's memories to distinguish that. And even if he tried to explain it, he'd already hidden too much.

Who would ever believe me after I already lied about my lost memories?

If Beatrice had already read the book…

"—Betty has not confirmed it yet."

"—Ngh, really?"

"Of course. A book of the dead must be handled carefully. And it's not even clear that the Meili we know is the one referred to by that book. If it were, then…"

"—! Meili's inside the tower…not good! We have to find her!"

The color drained from Emilia's face, and she leapt for the exit. But Beatrice spread her arms, blocking the way.

"Wait just one moment. If this really is her book, then no matter how quickly you go to find her, it's too late."

"That's… So that's why Ram went to find us and Julius and Echidna."

"If Meili happened to show up without any problems, then this would just be a cute misunderstanding on Betty's part."

Emilia clasped her hands as if in prayer, wishing that the book of the dead they'd found was just some sort of mistaken identity.

—Natsuki Subaru knew that prayer and wish were in vain.

"———"

Subaru's thoughts went into overdrive.

How should he handle things given that Meili's book of the dead had been found? The situation had changed. All thought of coming clean had already disappeared from his mind.

Everything depends on them not letting them read the book. If they do, they'll accuse me of killing her, and I won't be able to talk my way out of it.

But he didn't consider disposing of the book, either. He had a big interest in Meili's book of the dead, too. «Natsuki Subaru» would be there at the moment of the murder.

"I got called up in a hurry. What happened?"

"Shaula! You came."

As he was lost in thought, Shaula appeared lightly at the top of the stairs. Emilia was relieved at her arrival, and Beatrice as well.

"So you were safe." And then Beatrice looked at Shaula with her blue eyes. "There is something Betty would like to ask. Did you see Meili after eating? You were getting along well with her."

"That's kiddo…what, number two? Mmm, now that you mention it, I haven't seen her since breakfast. What happened to number two?"

Shaula lazily waved her hand and cocked her head. Emilia's brow furrowed.

"Ummm, the truth is, we found a book in the archive with Meili's name on it. We haven't read it yet. We wanted to make sure she was safe first."

"Ah, I see. So number two's dead then? Well, that's how it goes, I guess." With absolutely zero consideration for Emilia, Shaula just bluntly affirmed Meili's death.

"—!"

"You…"

Emilia's face tensed and Beatrice glared at Shaula in annoyance, but she ignored their reactions and looked at Subaru.

Honestly, he wasn't in a position to comment, but Shaula's attitude was unforgivable. *Isn't that a little too inhuman?*

"Shaula, c'mon, that's too much."

"Ouw, don't get mad, Master! And shouldn't you just read the book already? If you want to find number two, that's the fastest way."

"Fastest way…by reading Meili's book? That's…"

"If you read the book, you'll find out why number two died, too!"

Subaru tried to argue, but Shaula interrupted him with a carefree look on her face.

Telling him to read her book, as if that was the best choice, as if it was obvious.

"———"

"You and that other stud had a test run when you found the archive, didn't you? Nothing bad happened after that, so not reading it would be a waste!"

Puffing out her chest, Shaula flashed a beaming smile at her brilliant proposal. Gulping, Subaru turned back to the bookshelf, looking at the book as he thought.

It's hard to believe, but her idea makes sense.

Two members of the party had already read a book of the dead, so if they hadn't experienced any negative side effects, it was only natural to think of using the book as a way to confirm the reality of the situation.

Of course, it was possible that was what had robbed him of his memories and led to the split between him and «Natsuki Subaru», but in that case, it would be odd for there not to be any change in Julius. And the idea that Julius was hiding his own memory loss as well was too much of a leap.

In which case, isn't this exactly the escape hatch I needed?

"…There is certainly a logic to what Shaula's saying."

"…Are you serious? If the book of the dead is the real thing, it would mean seeing that girl's life. Someone you shared meals with. Who you knew… That would be…"

Going along with Shaula's proposal, Subaru volunteered to be the first reader. Beatrice was concerned about him volunteering for that, and it wasn't an unreasonable worry.

He and Meili had journeyed together, talked, slept under the same roof, and eaten at the same table. Compared to other books of the dead, the distance was all too close. Beatrice was worried that experiencing her death would irreparably scar Subaru's heart.

"I'm grateful for the concern. But someone has to do it."

Subaru answered her anxiety with a plausible resolve.

Her concern was reasonable, but ironically, it also didn't matter to Subaru. Having lost his memory, he'd also forgotten most of the time he spent with Meili. At present, he had only spent a few hours' worth of time with her. He had felt some relief from her presence in that time, but that was the limit of their connection.

She was just a girl that he hardly knew. His heart wasn't going to be hurt seeing her death.

"If someone has to read it, then it should be me instead of you…"

"Betty objects. If someone has to read it, then Subaru or Julius are the right choices. And judging from Julius's condition this morning, Subaru is effectively the only choice."

"Beatrice…"

Emilia tried to stop him with an emotional argument, but Beatrice countered with hard logic.

At the very least, she seemed willing to respect his determination. But Emilia had seen how unstable he was just minutes ago. Beatrice's logic was not enough to ease her fear.

Subaru put on a fake smile and nodded.

"—I'll read it. Besides, there's always the pattern where this is just a misunderstanding and we're getting all worked up over nothing, right?"

"…If anything happens, I'm going to peel you away from the book. By the hair." Emilia sounded serious.

"I'd rather you gently shake my shoulder and call my name or something. I don't want a permanent bald spot from having my hair pulled out."

Subaru faced the bookshelf with the others watching him.

Meili's book was there, still giving off the same strange aura.

At first, he hadn't been able to tell it apart from the other books, but as soon as he heard it was a name he knew, this happened. *Human perceptions just can't be trusted.*

And Subaru picked up the book in order to search for the most unreliable person in this world: himself.

"———"

Behind him, he could hear Emilia and Beatrice gulp. Shaula had her hands clasped behind her head, relaxed as she watched Subaru's resolve.

Taking a deep breath, he put his hand on the cover of the book as thick as a dictionary.

"—Here goes."

He opened the book—and then blacked out.

2

—By the time she was first conscious of herself, she had nothing.

There was no one around her.

No men, no women, no adults, no children, no elderly, no babies, no one.

Dark, dark. Black, black. Alone in a forest. She was by herself.

“______”

—Without knowing words, one couldn’t know how to grieve.

—Without knowing how to walk, one couldn’t know how to fight.

—Without knowing how to live, one had no way of finding a reason to die.

Because of that, she should have just died at some beast’s fangs, never achieving anything. If that murderous beast with curled horns on its forehead hadn’t taken her back to its nest.

—Because she didn’t know any words, she didn’t know how to grieve.

—Because she didn’t know how to walk, she didn’t know how to fight.

—But, because she learned how to live, she didn’t think to die.

Saved by the dark beasts’ fickle whims, she studied life in a feral manner and became the beasts’ queen. And as a beast, she thought her fate was to die in the field someday.

“—I said I’m bringing you back, so you’ll be coming with me.”

The one who said those words was a dark girl. A dark girl festering with a blood-stenched darkness.

The girl annihilated the pack of beasts, dragging her down from her throne. With a smile on her face, the girl robbed her of everything and carried her out of the forest.

—Because she didn’t know any words, she didn’t know how to grieve.

—Because she didn’t know how to walk, she didn’t know how to fight.

—And because she didn’t know anywhere else to live but there, she couldn’t even find a reason to die.

“You lost everything? That’s just a pathetic excuse. What do I care?”

That made her regret not knowing how to grieve.

“Grieve, for me. Fight, for me. And live, in order to love me.”

That made her regret not knowing how to fight.

“—If you’re saying you lost everything and forgot everything and it’s all gone, then I’ll just have to discipline you. That’s a mother’s job, after all."

That made her regret forgetting how to live and not thinking of how to die.

"Don't become that person's puppet. No matter how many lives you have, it wouldn't be enough. Not for anyone other than me."

As she was being taught words, how to walk, and how to live at Mother's feet, she met the dark girl again.

After that, the dark girl would regularly check on her. By the time she realized it, she'd started to spend a lot of time with the dark girl, to move together with her.

She remembered being thrown into hot water before she was first brought in front of Mother. The dark girl had mercilessly, roughly scrubbed away the built-up blood, mud, and grime. That might have been the last pleasure she ever felt.

—Because of Mother's intentions, she very clearly started being paired with the dark girl more.

The dark girl was abnormally strong. She excelled in the art of killing. She knew how to kill far better than how to live. And at the same time, she was slipshod and lazy about everything else.

"I have you here, [redacted]. I know if I leave it to you, you'll take care of it for me."

One thing or a dozen, it was always like that.

She was imprudent. Unreliable. Troublesome to deal with. Someone who couldn't be let out of sight. She was not loyal to Mother. She was free not just in how she killed, but also in how she lived.

When she was with that dark girl, when she was helping that undisciplined girl, she came close to misunderstanding. To thinking she might be free, too.

So…

"—Elsa is…dead."

—Dead. Dead. Turned to ash and gone.

The dark girl—no, she was not just a girl anymore, she was Elsa—Elsa, who wouldn't die even if she was killed.

—Dead. Dead. Turned into ash and gone.

She had seen Elsa with a spear in her stomach, both arms cut at the shoulders, and her head removed. And even then, she hadn't died. She had assumed Elsa would never die.

—Dead. Dead. Turned into ash and gone.

The people who had killed Elsa captured her and put her into a cold jail.

Alone in the dark room, the girl looked into the empty space and thought.

—I don't know how to grieve. I don't know how to fight. My life doesn't have any value.

She was a defective product. She'd been defective before she was taken in by beasts in the forest, before her actual parents had abandoned her. Incomplete. Broken.

That was why Elsa, who had been broken in the same sort of way, had fit so miraculously well with her.

—Hate, hate, hate? What even is hatred?

—Sad, sad, sad? What even is sadness?

The girl who had gone with the flow, just mimicking things in order to live, didn't know true emotion.

When she was with beasts, it had been beasts. When she was disciplined by Mother, it was Mother. And when she was with Elsa, she had copied Elsa. Just living as a doll that copied other people.

—With Elsa gone, who should I copy? What should I model my life on?

Time passed without her finding an answer.

During that time, she put on appearances, behaving how the people around her wanted her to behave. Or if someone wanted her to die, she would have died, too.

If Mother had ordered her to die in the guise of discipline, she would have—

She would…………………

"…I don't want that…"

She didn't want to end like that. She didn't want to end like this.

Unease burned away at her heart. The soul that had lived as others wished her to live was making its own plea at last.

I at least want to know the answer.

—What should she do since she was the reason Elsa died?

"—What, you're here too, ■■■■■?"

It was night.

As she stood in front of a shelf of books of the dead in the archive in the sand tower, there was a voice behind her.

Her heart skipped a beat and terror gripped her mind. If she was asked why she was there, if she was questioned, she wouldn't be able to hide it. She wouldn't be able to answer.

Whose book of the dead had she secretly gone there in search of?

"There's a book I wanted to find. It would be better to get everybody's help looking for it, but I can't help getting impatient …"

It was the black-haired boy. The familiar boy was scratching his head and talking about something.

She smiled, cocked her head, and hid her racing heart, acting like everything was normal.

"—Don't stay up all night, [redacted]."

With that, she moved away from the archive. Walking slowly. Gradually picking up pace, until finally she was running.

—He saw what I was doing. He knows. He noticed.

—I didn't want to be seen. Didn't want anyone to notice. Didn't want anyone to know.

But it was all wrong. The thing she'd tried to do hidden from view had been seen.

Maybe I should go ahead and use everything I set up around the tower. Wipe the slate clean—

Driven by impulse, she spun around. Going back the way she'd run, she returned to the archive full of books of the dead. The black-haired boy was sitting on the ground with his back to her.

There were multiple books scattered around him. *Did he find the book of the dead he was looking for?* That thought made her jealous, but with him still not noticing her, she—

"—So shallow…"

She caught her breath. He didn't turn around, but his words gripped her heart.

How did I get caught? My footsteps were silent. I'm not stupid enough to just walk around and make it obvious I mean to kill.

—No, now isn't the time for that. Smile, make a flirty gesture, act normal.

"Don't make eyes at me, it's disgusting. No one wants that sort of thing from you."

She was interrupted, silenced.

Her thoughts raced. She tried to find the best answer. What was the black-haired boy after?

"Don't feign innocence, little doll. Can't you hear what you really want in that heart of yours?"

What you really want. For some reason that clichéd expression seeped into her ears and she couldn't get it out.

"Lend an ear to your wish. If you do, you'll glimpse a little bit of what you really are. And if you see yourself, it'll be easier to understand what you truly want."

Know what I want. See myself.

What I want, wish…

"That's a nice face. Lots of flavor."

At some point, the black-haired boy had turned around and was standing in front of her. His hand gently took her braided hair and he looked at her with a terribly perverse pleasure in his black eyes.

She couldn't look away from those eyes. Her heart was stricken.

"If you know what you want, if you start to see your nature, then follow it. I feel your boring troubles, your tedious pain."

Saying that, selfishly deciding what was in her heart, the boy kissed her hair.

A creeping terror, and an even more powerful intoxication, ran up her spine.

"—I'll remember it."

If you know what you want, if you really see yourself…

Was what the girl, what ■■■■■ needed to do, something that she could do—was it something true to her nature?

"—About last night, how seriously should I take what you said?"

After that night, after finishing breakfast, she met the black-haired boy before they took their next action in the tower.

She had thought, unable to sleep. She had thought and thought and thought, but she still couldn't reach an answer.

And the boy acted as if that meeting hadn't even happened.

So she made an opening to talk to him. Unable to restrain her restlessness, she realized later she should have at least waited until moving to a place where no one would be able to hear them first.

"Out here is a little…you know? Let's move somewhere else first."

With his suggestion, they went into a random room. She wanted to ask what he really meant by what he said last night. There was no explanation of what he'd stumbled on, but…

"—Sorry, ■■■■■."

Right after that whisper in her ear, she was suddenly thrown to the floor.

Falling down, she hit her back. Unable to resist due to the sudden impact, the boy straddled her. She saw his face—he was sneering fiendishly. His face twisted in a way she'd never seen before.

"Asking directly is against the rules."

A strong force weighed against her neck.

Her lips opened, struggling for air. She couldn't fill her lungs. She desperately clawed at the hands around her neck. They didn't move. She couldn't shake free. Against someone like him…if only it was Elsa.

"This time you're out on a rule infraction, but I'm looking forward to bigger things from you next time. Do your best, just like every other time."

I don't…understand.

What're you saying? What does that mean? What am I hearing?

"This is an intriguing story in its own way. The case of Natsuki Subaru's murder."

She was being killed. That was the only thing she knew for sure. She was being killed. *What did I even manage in the end? I'm going to die. Everything from the time I was alone in the woods…what did it all* *mean? I'm being killed. Pointlessly, unable to do anything. Killed. He's enjoying it. Killing me. Having fun. Killing me. Being killed. Killed.*

—I'll kill you.

3

“Uaaaaaaaahhhhhh?!”

■■■■■■ fell backward with a shriek.

His world spun and the thing in his hands dropped. His throat rasped as he struggled to breathe, his lungs twitching in a panic.

“Wh—Subaru?!”

The silver-haired girl rushed over when ■■■■■■ hit the back of his head on something hard. She and the little girl in a fancy dress with her supported ■■■■■■’s shoulders.

“I-I…ah? I? Wh-wh-wh-wh-what…hap…pened?”

“Deep breaths! Take deep breaths! Don’t try to talk! Emilia, don’t touch that book! Their memories are mixing!”

The girl—no, Beatrice—frantically gave instructions as his eyes spun and his mouth foamed.

“Subaru’s behaving weird! Mixing? What did that book do?!”

“Most likely he dove too deeply. The way he’s talking has blended with hers,” Beatrice explained.

Emilia’s eyes widened, and then she leapt to him, pulling his cheeks and making him look her in the eyes.

“Subaru, remember. It’s okay. You are Natsuki Subaru, my knight. ‘Allow me to introduce myself, the peerless, indestructible, penniless…umm…and, and…’”

Emilia reached into the depths of her memories as she started saying some mad speech.

Hearing that nonsensical line, ■■■■■■, ■■■aru, Su■■ru…

“I…it’s me…right, not…I…Elsa is gone…”

“Save it! Calm down. It’s okay…slowly…slowly.”

“It’s like a splinter, the other memories will slowly seep out. Then the original Subaru should come back properly.”

Emilia and Beatrice were talking to Subaru—*Subaru, it’s Subaru.*

Doing as they said, he carefully removed the splinter of memory that had been jabbed into his brain.

“It’s…it’s okay…”

Hugging Subaru as he shuddered, Emilia gently, warmly soothed him. He entrusted his body to her as he slowly unraveled himself from the other person in his head.

The only other person in the room quietly watched them struggle through this.

“………”

—Shaula’s green eyes narrowed as she just quietly watched.

CHAPTER 5

MURDER BECOMES A HABIT

1

A dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark place.

Deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep in the back of his mind.

I, me, I, *who,* you, *you, Natsuki Subaru, Meili Portroute.*

Kenichi Natsuki, Elsa Gramhilde, Nahoko Natsuki, Petra Leyte, Emilia, Shaula, Beatrice, Frederica Baumann, Anastasia Hoshin, Garfiel Tinzel, Julius Juukulius, Otto Suwen, Ram, the blue-haired, someone, me, you, I, me, someone, I, you, you, I…

—Me, I, Natsuki Subaru. Me, I, Natsuki Subaru.

—Who, I, Meili Portroute. Who, I, Meili Portroute.

Thoughts spun wildly. The border between reality and dream blurred. They melted together, blended together, merged into each other, loved each other, hated each other, pained each other, adored each other, desired each other, killed each other, shared each other's hopes, broke each other, menaced each other, understood each other, cried together, laughed together, misunderstood each other.

One could only be oneself and nothing more. Another person could only be that person and nothing more. There was no room for compromise on that, no benevolent give-and-take. It wasn't an arena where two sides could come to an understanding. There was no agree-to-disagree, no having it both ways—just an empty gulf between the two.

"Subaru…"

"______"

Shaking his head, he was in the grips of working out the splinter that was the other person inside him. Until he finished that, he couldn't answer the girls watching him with concern in their eyes.

He had to establish the line between himself and others, to extract Natsuki Subaru from the blend that had formed.

He performed a dissection, picking out the right pronouns, memories, recollections, impressions, feelings, and everything else. Carefully and precisely. Or else they would all melt and merge together and he would no longer be able to separate them.

He and the girl who was killed by his own two hands were blended…

"—Natsuki, what did you see? Can you tell us?"

"Ugh…ah?"

There was a voice coming from right in front of Subaru as he struggled with his jumbled personality.

It was a person with pale blue-green eyes.

Anastasia…? No, Echidna?

She was crouching down to meet his eyes as she spoke.

"Wait, Echidna. Right now, Subaru just went through something terrible…"

"I'm well aware of that. But this is a really bad situation for all of us right now, and we can't afford to let what he did go to waste. We need to move as quickly as possible to figure out what's going on."

"That's…true, but…"

Emilia and Echidna argued in front of him. As she spoke, Echidna glanced at the book lying on the floor for a moment—at Meili Portroute's book of the dead.

"I'll ask again, Natsuki. The book you read, what did you see in—Meili's…memories…"

"…Agh…"

Emilia covered her face with her hands. Even though she'd expected it, Echidna's face still tensed.

Everyone there understood what a new book of the dead being added to the stacks meant.

The young girl who they'd talked to, had shared a meal with only a few hours earlier, had been lost.

And the confused state Subaru was in was from experiencing her death himself.

"Calm down, Subaru. Calm down. Just focus on recovering your sense of self."

"…Sor…ry…"

"It's fine. In times like this, just rely on Betty completely… This isn't your fault. There's no need to push yourself."

"______"

Beatrice nestled up to Subaru, stroking his exhausted head.

Emilia and Beatrice were trying their best to support his shattered heart. Ironically, though, their concern was cruelly flaying his heart.

Beatrice tried so mercifully to tell him it wasn't his fault.

But this crime had been committed by none other than «Natsuki Subaru». Beatrice didn't know that as she tried to console him, but he did, and it made her efforts all the more ridiculous and sad.

"—Ms. Ram, what are your thoughts?"

While that was happening between Subaru and Beatrice, Julius had a serious expression on his face as he shifted the conversation to Ram. The two of them had arrived later, but knew about Meili's book of the dead being found, and could see what happened to Subaru when he read it.

From the looks on their faces, they seemed to have taken the shock relatively in stride.

That's probably because…

"Those two were aaaalways cautious of me. I was a killer, so it makes sense… Ah, but you know, big sis and the scarf lady were so easygoing."

Internally, Subaru accepted that analysis.

While that was happening, Ram looked down at the book on the floor. Peering at the title written on the cover, Ram exhaled slightly.

"If we are to believe Subaru's statement, young Meili is already…"

"Barusu is not so skilled or so cold to lie in a predicament like this… That must be Meili's book."

"…I could read it as well to substantiate it."

"You think you would be fine because you've done it before? That's far too optimistic considering the same was true for Barusu. Though it is certainly possible that he ended up like this is just due to his mental immaturity." Ram paused there, meeting Julius's tragic, heroic gaze. "Unfortunately, though, I wouldn't say your current condition is notably better than Barusu's."

"…Understandable. Considering my decision to act alone yesterday, I do not have a compelling counterargument."

"Sad to say, but I'm in agreement." Julius was self-deprecating and Echidna agreed, too. She rubbed the fox scarf around her neck as she pointed to Subaru with her chin. "It's not that I don't trust you, Julius, but seeing Natsuki like that, I'm hesitant to try the same thing again… Whether it has to do with the number or quality of the books."

"We have no way of confirming whether this is due to Barusu reading a second book or because the burden of reading the book of someone particularly familiar was especially large."

Ram held her elbows and Echidna lowered her eyes and nodded. Julius's brow furrowed, and he bit his lip in bitter disappointment.

"———"

Most likely the second explanation Echidna and Ram proposed was right.

The massive emotional damage Subaru's heart had sustained was because the subject of the book of the dead had been someone close. The vivid record of her life caused a shock that cracked him.

As a result, as he waded deep inside *herself*, Subaru had lost track of the boundary between the two of them and they began to mix.

Even the empty inertia of life that the girl had carried for so long…

"—Anyway, we can't just sit around doing nothing. Let's search for Meili!"

A loud crack split the air.

Emilia had forcefully clapped her hands in front of her. Looking up, she focused the attention of everyone in the archive on her. Hearing that, Subaru's eyes widened.

"Search…?"

—Search? What for? What's the point of that?

—She's already dead. I'm already dead.

—Even though you didn't care before «I» died.

"It might already be too late even if we find her. We should have been with her, but we weren't. The least we could do is find her."

"———"

"We can't just leave her all alone even more than we already did, right?"

There was no real reason behind what she was saying, no logic or sense to it.

It didn't change «her» analysis in the back of Subaru's mind that it was pointless. A realist would argue they should use their time on something more worthwhile.

But there was no one who attempted to argue with her.

"We will have to change our plan for today. Let's split up and search for her," Echidna agreed.

"I…am going to check on Rem. I was with her the whole time before I went to gather everyone, but…I need to check on her."

"You should do that, Ms. Ram… Subaru, it may be cruel, but I wish to confirm. Were you able to observe Miss Meili's final moments in the book of the dead?"

Subaru hesitated on how to answer Julius's carefully worded question.

Of course, the answer was a resounding yes. He had experienced Meili losing her life in a way that had been unthinkable.

"I was flailing around in so much pain as my neck was strangled. But even that struggle ended with a snap… I wonder if that's what it's like to die?"

Subaru had experienced that situation from the perspective of the victim and the perpetrator. He'd even hidden her corpse in the room, trying to cover it up so she wouldn't be found.

—Natsuki Subaru had thrown in his lot with the «Natsuki Subaru» who had murdered «her».

The guilt that thought made him feel was enough to make him want to die.

But…

"Subaru, did you see it? Did you see her—"

"—I didn't see the very end. Something happened inside the tower. That much was clear. But…"

He swallowed that guilt that made him want to die and then lied in order to protect himself.

"…Too bad…"

The dangerous feeling taking root in his heart, trying to get him to confess his crime, was a curse left behind by Meili Portroute.

A desire for Emilia and the others to find Meili's corpse, to find «her». To have them find it, regret it, lament it, and let out the feelings clogging his heart.

He was rapidly losing track of whether Natsuki Subaru, «she», or «Natsuki Subaru» was wishing for that.

"…Do you have the energy to read the book one more time?"

"Echidna!"

Echidna made a merciless suggestion, but before he could answer, Beatrice's face twisted in anger. She held his arm tightly, glaring at Echidna with her big eyes.

"Making Betty shout that name…! Betty will not allow that. Betty is against going any further, and for more reasons than just emotion."

"Considering the danger of mixing up memories, I wasn't planning on recommending actually going through with it. I just wanted to confirm whether he had the resolve to do it or not. Even if he said he could, I wasn't going to make him."

"…Betty will just pray that is the truth."

The anger in Beatrice's eyes didn't recede. As the friction between them crackled, Emilia broke in.

"That's enough. I'm also against having Subaru push himself any further. And I'm against staying deadlocked here any longer… I want to find her as soon as possible."

"Agreed. Let's split up. Subaru, you—"

"—Betty will look after Subaru."

Preempting Julius's concern, Beatrice volunteered to take care of Subaru. Everyone else nodded at that.

"Okay, Beatrice. I'll see you soon, Subaru."

Entrusting each other to their roles, Emilia rushed out of the archive with the others.

Running around the tower in order to find Meili.

To find «me».

Subaru watched them leave without saying anything…

"—Now then, what are you going to do?"

After they'd left, Beatrice glared at the person leaning against a shelf—Shaula—her voice sharp and brittle.

Despite being there the whole time, she hadn't said a word ever since Subaru opened Meili's book of the dead.

"Who, me? Nothing. I'm star guardian, remember? I don't have any reason to help y'all. Of course if Master asked, I'd go all out doing whatever he wanted!"

"…Then don't hang around here and go search for Meili, too."

"—Is that really what you want, Master?"

Shaula cocked her head, her distinctive green eyes narrowing.

She asked Subaru directly, going over Beatrice's head. Her expression was almost coquettish, imbued with a fragrant devilishness.

The sudden change of mood made Subaru feel as if someone was holding his heart. Shaula was holding Meili's book of the dead in front of her ample chest.

"If you asked, I'd even shoot down the moon. But I want to hear it from you, not the half-blood or kiddo number one or the stud."

"I…"

"Should I search for kiddo number two? Or…"

Shaula stopped there, leaving the last part unspoken.

But Beatrice was suspicious of her attitude, seemingly waiting for an order from Subaru. Subaru was also bewildered, but the unease clawing inside his heart was even greater.

It's almost like she's…

"Doesn't it sound like she knows about us?*"*

"———"

The voice in the back of Subaru's mind was filled with good cheer, as if enjoying the situation.

Natsuki Subaru and «Natsuki Subaru» were blended together in one body, and after reading the book of the dead, a completely new personality had been added into the mix, leaving Subaru with a split set of personalities.

—Subaru wanted to hide the fact that he was involved in Meili's death.

—Subaru wanted Meili's corpse, which he had hidden, to be found.

—Subaru wanted to accuse «Natsuki Subaru» of killing «her».

Those wishes were all at odds, swirling and struggling for dominance, trying to grasp a future for themselves. And at the end of that conflict, the answer reached was…

"—Shaula, take care of Meili."

"Roger. If that's what you want, then that's fine with me."

Shaula saluted cutely at the hoarse order he managed to get out.

And then she handed the book of the dead to him and stuck out her tongue.

Subaru reached out to take it when Shaula leaned in close and whispered in his ear—

"—I understand what to do."

She turned around and ran off down the stairs before he could ask what she meant. As her bobbing ponytail disappeared in the distance, Subaru managed a hoarse murmur.

"What…was that…"?

The last thing she said, her pushing the book of the dead into his hands, he couldn't understand any of it.

"Perhaps it is pointless to think too much about her. Also, it would be best to let go of that book now."

"——"

Beatrice's words stung.

Her concerned gaze, the light so similar to what had been in Emilia's eyes, pierced him, making his heart more uncomfortable instead of putting it at ease.

He didn't have any right to accept her kindness.

He had hidden his memory loss, covered up his participation in Meili's death, hidden the corrupt scheme that the evil «Natsuki Subaru» persona was plotting, so how could he possibly interact with everyone as if everything was fine?

"…Why are you so kind?"

"…That is an abrupt question. What is this about?"

The question left her at a loss. But because she trusted Subaru, she didn't ignore it.

Because Emilia and Beatrice trusted «Natsuki Subaru»…

"——"

When he thought that, the dark blot in his heart spread.

The way «I» felt about Elsa is the same way they feel about «Natsuki Subaru».

It was a jewel that Natsuki Subaru alone could never attain.

Why is that guy, why is that brutal person, why is that hideously sneering guy, why is the enemy involved with Elsa's death, why is the murderer who sneered while killing Meili, why is the coward who tried to cover up «my» death, why is he so loved?

There was a voice that demanded to know.

I want to know. I don't know. Only I, only Subaru, only «I», only Meili. I don't know. I can't know. I want to know. Why is it so one-sided?

Jealousy burned his heart, an envy of that shining jewel he could never attain.

The way to get his hands on that jewel…

"—Should I tell you how?"

“______”

The sweet whisper in his head cruelly called to him.

And as the flames of envy consumed Subaru’s being, he realized the way to extinguish them was close at hand.

Isn’t there a way to know the answer right here in my arms?

—The thick, black book welcomed his curiosity with horrifically open arms.

2

There was a limit to how well people could understand each other through words alone.

No matter the relationship, it was impossible to know with absolute certainty what lay in another person's heart. People hide things, even from the ones they love. People lie. People have secrets.

Just like Natsuki Subaru. He loved and respected his parents, but he still kept secrets from them.

Loving someone, trusting them from the bottom of your heart, entrusting your body to them, forming a bond with them—even everyone with all those different types of connections were no exception. No matter the bond, none of that changed the simple fact.

So however much you might want it, it was impossible to fully understand a person's everything.

—No, it should have been impossible.

“______”

—Meili Portroute.

By reading her book of the dead, Subaru had experienced her entire life in abridged form. It was all bite-size chunks, but he knew how she'd lived, her beliefs, her philosophy.

There was no deception there, no secrets, and no lies. Only the genuine article.

How there was someone «she» cared deeply about. How her heart had been lost when she lost that pillar of support. How she struggled to know how to feel about Subaru and the others who had stolen that person from her. How she'd sought out a certain book of the dead in order to better understand what she really felt.

He even knew the shame and despair when that confusion was discovered.

That is the real point of this archive.

What Emilia, Beatrice, and everyone else in the tower really thought, the thing he so desperately wanted to know: the reason why they all trusted «Natsuki Subaru».

Were they allies or enemies? Who killed him and who was an ally who should be allowed to live?

Could they be loved or not? Hated or not?

—The way to get the answer to all those questions is in the books of the dead, right?

“…Subaru, you look like you're really not feeling well. If you can't calm down here, then it would be better to go someplace else to rest.”

Beatrice touched his shoulder, looking up at him in concern.

Looking into her distinctive butterfly-crested blue eyes, Subaru caught his breath. Her tiny hands, her slender neck. Her childish, dainty body.

"You're so small…"

"Mrgh, what was that? This minimalism is one of Betty's most adorable features. You are always saying so yourself, too."

Seeing her face puffed into a pout, Subaru almost broke into a smile.

It was true that was the sort of joke he would have made if he were feeling more like himself. But the realization of something he shared with «Natsuki Subaru» soon filled his heart with bitterness.

She really is a small little kid.

If I grabbed her skull and just slammed it as hard as I could against the floor, she would die just from that.

—If I killed her, would her book of the dead appear here, too?

"Just like mine did."

A voice that couldn't be Subaru's cackled at his intrusive thought.

The voice was oddly familiar—the dead girl's sweet teasing riled Subaru.

"———"

Just as before, though, he refused to pay the voice any heed.

But he couldn't forget the method that sweet voice had recommended.

"For now, we should go back to the room inhabited by that spirit. That seems like the best idea."

Judging by Subaru's relative unresponsiveness, Beatrice suggested leaving the archive. Not having a reason to refuse, he nodded.

"Yeah."

"Then we should put the book back as well… As best as Betty can tell, the ordering of the books is different every time, so putting it here is not too reliable, but it is better than nothing."

Saying that, she took Meili's book and pushed it tightly back onto the shelf right in front of the staircase. It was an easy-to-find spot, but if what she said was true, it was doubtful whether it would be possible to encounter the same book again in the mysterious archive.

"Meh, not that it matters now. Since if you want to talk to me, I'll always be here in your head."

"…Patrasche is there, right? And Ram, too. So let's go."

"Betty agrees, but that is a rather rude way to put it. Sheesh. Betty here is your partner. Don't forget it."

"S-sorry. That wasn't on purpose. It's not like I forgot."

For an instant, Subaru tensed, taking a jab in the heart. Trying to redirect away from that stiffness, he turned his attention to the green room downstairs.

The black land dragon waiting there. Patrasche's presence was a massive consolation for him.

Patrasche had actually risked her life, sprinting through danger trying to save him. She was one being Subaru could wholeheartedly trust without doubting how she really felt or her real intentions…

"Really? You think she would really help you like that if she knew you weren't actually «Natsuki Subaru»?"

"———"

"In the end, you don't have any real allies, do you?"

He didn't respond to the taunt of the girl haunting him. He didn't believe that was true and didn't want to believe it.

"Come on, give me your hand, Subaru."

"Hngh, ah."

As the girl in his head stole his attention, his focus slipped away from Beatrice. So when she tried to take his hand, he was slow to notice why her eyes suddenly widened.

She was looking at the hand he held out—at his hand covered in scratches.

"…Ah, that's…"

Subaru's heart burned as he realized that she had seen something he shouldn't have allowed anyone to see.

Right now, it's impossible to tie the scratches to Meili. But if anyone finds her corpse, if they realize she was strangled, it would be easy to put two and two together.

"What will you do? Are you going to start now?"

Laughing at his fear, her voice swelled in anticipation of violence. Subaru could feel his temple aching in time with his pounding heart.

But despite his worry, Beatrice just sighed a little…

"—You scratched your hands again. That's a bad habit."

"…Eh?"

"That is a bad spot. What were you going to say if Emilia noticed? And if it gets especially bad, Betty won't be able to look the other way about it, either."

Beatrice averted her eyes as she ran her finger over Subaru's wrist.

It was almost as if it was normal for him to have wounds on his arm, as if she was used to seeing that. And her attitude made it clear those wounds she was familiar with weren't from training or fighting.

She was acting like it was normal for Subaru to mutilate himself.

"———"

Beatrice's fingertips glowed faintly as she touched his wound and, gradually, a warmth enveloped his arm.

There was a faint ticklishness, most likely the feeling of the wounds being healed by magic. This was yet another classic fantasy world trope, and he was finally getting to see it for the first time.

But at the same time, the aggressive thoughts taking root in his mind quickly dissipated.

"…That's no fun…"

The girl scoffed in annoyance at her expectations being betrayed. But Subaru's attention was on the dangerous negative feedback loop he'd almost slipped into.

The dangerous choice he had almost taken was proof of it. *What am I doing?*

There's no reason to get obsessed over preemptively using the books of the dead. All the more so trying to use them at a stage where I haven't even made any preparations. That would just be suicide.

The goal isn't to kill them, it's to read the books that should show up after I kill th—

"No, that's…"

"It's not wrong."

"It *is* wrong! Gh!"

Subaru loudly rejected the smirking voice mocking him.

Rejected. He rejected it. He unwaveringly rejected the girl's sweet temptation. Obviously. Since he'd already decided. He'd made his choice.

—I asked Shaula to help search for Meili.

The only thing hiding Meili's corpse was a bit of cloth and the fact she'd been pushed into the corner of a room. Anyone looking for her would find her before long. If he really wanted to prevent that, then he shouldn't have agreed to the search.

Of course, he didn't know how to say it in a way that avoided the search and didn't draw any suspicion to him, either. But if he really wanted to hide the truth, he could have interfered in the search.

From the point that he hadn't done that, Subaru had given into «her» request.

"So…I…!"

"S-Subaru…Betty's hand hurts…gh."

"—Ah."

With how vehemently he rejected the voice in his head, Subaru grabbed Beatrice's wrist with far too much strength. She was wincing while weakly chiding his thoughtlessness.

Quickly letting go, Subaru apologized. But Beatrice just shook her head.

"It is okay. Water off Betty's back. And your scratches should be better now."

"…Ah…yeah, they are. I'm really sorry for causing you so much trouble."

"You promised not to say that."

After that, Beatrice held out the hand he'd grabbed. For a second, he hesitated to take it again, but he quickly shook off the doubt.

He held Beatrice’s hand gently, and a warm touch held his hand in return.

“Now, let’s go. Resting your body and heart are our first priority.”

Holding her dainty hand as she smiled, Subaru somehow managed to nod.

Telling himself it was okay, that he was doing the right thing, in order not to give in to his inner voice.

“—It’s fine. I’m…fine.”

Just repeating that over and over, in order to convince himself.

—If Meili really is found, then I should come clean and confess.

As he indulged in Beatrice’s kindness, Subaru decided to follow through on the resolution he had made before reading the book of the dead.

But in the end, that resolve didn’t come to fruition.

Despite searching all around the tower, they couldn’t find Meili.

The young girl’s corpse suddenly disappeared from the Pleiades Watchtower, as if in a puff of smoke.

3

"It's been a string of misses since coming to this tower."

They were gathered in the base room having dinner when Ram's murmur slipped out.

That blunt statement was an accurate enough depiction of the party's current state that no one could really argue it. They all understood the feeling that made Ram want to grumble, too.

They'd suffered so much in order to reach the tower, but the trials and tribulations just kept coming.

The difficulties of the examination on the second floor, the problem of Anastasia and Echidna, plus Meili's death added on top, and though he hadn't mentioned it this time, Subaru's memory loss should have also been included in the pile.

It would almost be easier to say their journey was cursed.

Everyone's expressions were dark, and they looked exhausted. Changing their plans for the afternoon, they'd spent all their time searching for Meili, and yet they turned up nothing. The feeling of futility from a swing and a miss was worse than expected.

In the end, it just made dinner's flavorless soup taste all the more salty.

"To check, I even went to ask Reid, but he said he hadn't seen her. And that he was bored because no one had come since yesterday… I think he probably wasn't lying."

"As outrageous a man as he is, it is scary that Betty cannot say for sure that he is not one who would take pleasure in hurting a child… but Betty trusts Emilia's instinct."

Subaru's body cowered on an instinctive level when the red-haired, one-eyed man who was the second-floor guardian came up in conversation.

That man had left nothing but the worst possible impression on Subaru, but fortunately Emilia had come back safely from taking his statement. *Not that I have a right to feel relief from hearing that.*

"Today's results were unfortunate. But tomorrow…"

"Sorry, but if you intend to keep searching for her tomorrow, I'm going to have to object."

"Echidna…?!"

Emilia had just been about to pull herself together for tomorrow when Echidna's cold judgment interrupted. Emilia pursed her lips.

"We can't do that! Who knows what she's feeling—"

"She doesn't have any ability to feel emotions like that anymore. The book of the dead Natsuki checked made that clear. We can't afford to waste any more time like this."

"…That's a rather hasty judgment."

Emilia couldn't meet Echidna's logic with anything other than pathos, so Beatrice quietly stared her down in Emilia's stead.

"Even if it is a logical judgment, it makes Betty disinclined to agree. Do you have a reason for saying that?"

"…Is it really that strange? There's a limit to our supplies, and the longer we stay here, the greater the burden for both of our camps. And we have no way of contacting her."

"That is a reasonable assessment. Lady Emilia and Lady Anastasia—though one of them technically isn't fully present—are both important figures taking part in the royal selection. Neither should be staying in this desert tower for an extended period."

Beatrice parried Echidna, but it was Ram, a fellow member of Emilia's faction, who agreed with Echidna.

The difference in how they felt about clearing the tower and their future plans was starting to show.

"I don't like this. If you're going to get into it, then do it somewhere away from me and Master. I'm just gonna build a happy family with Master. One daughter, two sons, and three concubines."

"…You stay quiet."

Shaula stuck out her and scooted over next to Subaru. Ordinarily she'd interacted with Meili a lot, but with Meili gone, she had focused her sudden flippant outbursts more on Subaru.

Even though he responded perfunctorily, he had his own thoughts about her general attitude. Not how unconcerned she was with the outcome of the current debate, but with how she'd acted in the archive.

She had looked to him for a direct order. What had she wanted to hear from him? How much would she actually do if Subaru specifically asked for it?

—What would have happened if he hadn't given up on using the books of the dead?

"That's enough arguing."

Julius's voice disrupted the tense mood and Subaru's thoughts.

Anguish etched into the creases in his brow, he held his hand up, stopping Echidna, and nodded at Beatrice and Emilia.

"I apologize for what was a statement that could be easily misconstrued. But I would ask you to understand, she…Echidna is not just proposing it for no reason."

"Stop it, Julius. That's…"

"Lady Emilia's camp may well have lost the girl who was accompanying them. On top of that, it is not desirable to hide things. We should demonstrate our sincerity as well."

Echidna swallowed what she was about to say. Seeing that, Julius turned to the others.

"As we discussed, Echidna currently has control of Lady Anastasia's body. On top of that, this state is wearing away at Lady Anastasia's Odo and it cannot be maintained indefinitely."

"Wearing away at her Odo… Wait, has that been happening the whole time she's been sleeping?" Emilia asked.

"…I see. I suppose that is why you want to hurry to clear the tower."

The secret Julius revealed left Emilia and Beatrice stunned.

Hearing the word *Odo*, Subaru couldn't really understand anything other than the vague nuance. *Odo* and *mana* sounded like the usual terms that came up in magical fantasies. But judging from everyone else's reaction, it was an important thing not to lose.

Echidna heaved her shoulders.

"There's not much point in keeping up appearances now. Julius is telling the truth. Just by being in this state, I'm shortening Ana's life. I want to give her body back to her as soon as possible."

"Even if it means letting go of the human body that has given you freedom, I wonder?" Beatrice intimated.

"I never wanted this to happen, either. Even with control of Ana's body, my heart is still bound. And, it might be strange for an artificial spirit to say this, but…I think things should stick to the containers they were meant to have. If you just borrow someone's appearance, so long as the contents don't match it will come out in the end. It becomes unnatural. It's a revolting thing."

"—!"

Echidna was deliberately avoiding their eyes, and it sounded as if she was cursing herself. But the same words tore deep into Subaru's heart, too, just when he was least expecting it.

Borrowing appearances when the contents didn't match… Coming face-to-face with that idea was a heavy blow.

"It might not be any consolation, but if the knowledge of the sage who was said to be all-knowing is hidden away somewhere in this tower, then it might also be able to guide us to wherever she ended up. In that sense as well, it's logical to prioritize clearing this tower… Though I admit it is an unfair argument," Echidna concluded.

"No. Thank you. You were worrying about me and Meili, too, weren't you?"

When Emilia indicated she was willing to go along with her proposition, Echidna looked away, embarrassed. "…Hard to say. Maybe I only care about Ana's body."

Smiling faintly at that, Emilia's cheeks tensed, and she affirmed the decision.

"I am *really* worried about Meili. But I understand Echidna's feelings, too. So starting tomorrow, let's do what we can to get to the top of this tower. Of course, I intend to search for Meili as much as I can as well…"

"That is putting the cart before the horse if you let it get in the way of clearing the tower, Lady Emilia."

"I understand, Ram. I have to think for myself about what is most important."

Putting her hand to her chest, Emilia warned herself.

And then she turned to Subaru, who had been watching the exchange at a distance. For a second, he was overwhelmed by the force of her gaze, but what followed was not an accusation.

"Are you okay with that, too, Subaru?"

"…Yeah, that's fine. That's what Meili would… Wait, why are you asking me?"

"Since you were the one who read her book, obviously. With how bad it seemed, you would be the one most worried about Meili."

Subaru gulped at her reminder.

A quick look revealed that Emilia wasn't the only one staring at him. Beatrice, Ram, Echidna, Julius, Shaula, they were all studying him.

His mind couldn't begin to imagine what intent lay behind their gazes.

And with his head not working, he followed his cowardly heart.

"—I am worried. But I don't think Meili would want us to end up stuck here, either."

"Wow, so wonderful, mister. Even though you don't believe that at all yourself."

The girl watching from the back of his mind laughed at his terrible, superficial answer. But even knowing that, Subaru managed to hold his act together and desperately think.

—What do I take and what do I abandon? I have to decide where I stand soon.

As a bit of an aside, there is a famous saying.

Murder becomes a habit.

This is a quote from the famous detective Hercule Poirot.

Not because humans who kill people grow fond of killing and eventually repeat their crimes in order to fulfill those desires. No, it's because people who resort to murder once in order to resolve a problem will, when faced with a new problem, inevitably be tempted to consider the same method they used once before.

From the moment they consider the possibility of murdering someone who need not be killed, they have already made a grave mistake.

Even if they hadn’t killed of their own volition the first time, even if they despised the act of killing, even if they had seen the entire murder from the victim’s perspective, the habit becomes harder and harder to shake.

It becomes something that won’t go away.

—Murder becomes a habit.

4

—Late at night, Subaru took advantage of the opening that finally presented itself in order to act alone.

He snuck out of the green room and peered down the hallway in the dark tower, making sure no one was around before stealthily heading toward his target.

"I don't think Meili would want us to end up stuck here, either… What an actor."

"No one asked you."

"Giggle. Don't get mad. That wasn't sarcastic. I really meant it."

Even though he was trying to move stealthily, the mocking hallucination was still whispering in his ears.

The really dangerous thing about auditory hallucinations was that there was no stopping them. Even if Subaru covered his ears, even if he wanted to shut the voice out, those sweet whispers continued to echo directly in his brain. No matter how much he rejected it, he couldn't shut it out.

"They say sometimes no really means yes."

Intentionally ignoring the sing-song mockery, Subaru strained his eyes in the dark.

After dinner, the party had discussed how to continue their efforts the next day, and then quickly retired in order to recharge for the day ahead. With the example of Meili, Emilia and the others proposed everyone sleeping together. Subaru, however, managed to get out of that by asking to recover in the green room to deal with the lingering aftereffects of reading the book of the dead. Of course, there was some reluctance to his proposal, but…

"You look deathly pale, mister."

"———"

"So are you leaving that blue-haired lady in the room with you for later?"

The hallucination was trying to tempt Subaru into a rampage in order to get his hands on books of the dead. Because of that, it kept bringing up the sleeping beauty who would be easiest to target, but he ignored that.

Going after her was nowhere near the top of his list of priorities. If anything, convincing Patrasche had been the bigger challenge. He'd put his finger to his lips and asked her to let him go in secret, but it was dubious how much made it through when the dragon couldn't understand what he was saying.

And even the plan of reading Emilia and the others' books of the dead was still just in the realm of delusions. Even if he went through with the plan, he couldn't pull it off without catching them by surprise.

So his goal in sneaking out tonight was for something else entirely.

"—Are you going to do something about my dead body?"

"…If I don't check what's going on, then neither of us will be satisfied."

"Heh-heh, that's true. I agree completely. We're like two halves of the same whole."

The delighted hallucination spoke to just how ridiculous Subaru's actions were.

Meili's corpse not being discovered was more a devilish trick than an act of God. In the end, taking advantage of the fortunate fact that his actions hadn't come to light, Subaru's resolve to come clean withered and he started working on the process of properly hiding her corpse.

It was the pinnacle of arbitrary, on-the-spot decision-making. Subaru wanted to curse himself.

But if he didn't finish hiding Meili's corpse now, it was likely Emilia would find it, since she hadn't given up on her search. That unbounded, positive, sheltered girl's spirit wouldn't break until she finally found Meili's corpse.

Because of that, Subaru needed peace of mind.

Without that, he couldn't construct a foundation. Without a foundation, he couldn't put up the load-bearing walls of the castle that was his future. If he couldn't put up those walls, his future would never be secure.

The existence of Meili was an obstruction to the castle that was Natsuki Subaru's peace of mind.

"So heartless."

Ignoring that entirely reasonable reaction, Subaru arrived at the problematic room, the place where he'd hidden her corpse. Gulping slightly, he steeled his resolve and slipped through the door.

Honestly, it left a bad taste in his mouth, but carrying the body outside and burying it in the desert would be the best course.

"———"

There was a stone pedestal sort of thing in the back of the square room. Meili's body was lying behind that, beneath a white cloth.

That crude level of hiding was a testament to how panicked Subaru had been. Feeling pathetic at that, Subaru slowly moved behind the pedestal…

"…What?"

…but he was not reunited with Meili's corpse.

"———"

Speechless, his eyes widened at the sight.

There was nothing behind the pedestal. Not her body, not the cloth he'd draped over her, nothing.

"Why… This is definitely where I hid her…"

Spinning around, he got down on hands and knees in the center of the room. There was still a faint trace of blood. The blood that had dripped from the wounds on his arm had left a mark there.

This was where Meili died. As stupid as he was, he wouldn't make a mistake about something like this.

So then where did her body—

"—Out sneaking around so late at night. Are you looking for something, Barusu?"

"—Ngh?!"

Subaru's shoulders twitched and he immediately spun around when he heard the voice behind him. His face was ghostly pale as he saw someone standing in the doorway.

Her short, peach-colored hair, her sharp, intelligent pink eyes, her dignified yet cute face staring coldly back at him, she seemed almost like a gallant flower as she stood there holding her arms.

Ram was clearly hostile.

"Or should I call you a fake? A Barusu—a Natsuki Subaru knockoff."

"Wha…"

Shredded by her sharp gaze and voice, Subaru's heart cried out. There was a heat to her words that utterly betrayed the impression Subaru had gotten from his short time interacting with her.

Feeling a burn as if flames the color of her eyes were scorching him, Subaru struggled to breathe.

"Why are you so flustered? You heard my question. Your job is to answer."

"I-I was just…"

"Just?"

Grasping for any excuse he could find, he struggled in a panic to get the gears in his head spinning again. He cursed his slow-to-start brain while needing to find some sort of godlike explanation in order to get through this.

But by the time his brain finally started moving, it got hung up on a single fact and couldn't get into gear.

—They got me.

"———"

The whole discussion around the dinner table about not finding Meili's body had been a bluff. Subaru had been incredibly relieved that his crime hadn't been discovered. So when he heard the convenient story of the frantic search reaching a dead end, when he thought his pathetic efforts to hide the body had worked, he just believed it.

As a result, he was awkwardly going pale as the truth came out.

Subaru had seen this scene countless times before in all sorts of TV dramas.

The murderer had devised some perfect plan, only to screw up by coming back to the scene of the crime where the detectives or police were waiting. Providing the incontrovertible proof by his own actions and then being caught red-handed.

Most viewers took it as an absurd mistake that they would never make if they were in that situation. But would they really? Was Subaru's predicament not practically a joke?

"—I see you aren't denying being a fake. I suppose that is evidence you do at least recognize how badly you bungled your act. You didn't investigate your target well enough. You were lazy."

"What do you mean lazy…?"

"The first one to notice something off was Emilia. There should be a limit to how poorly you could play your hand."

Ram didn't hide the scorn in her voice as she revealed the unexpected source of the suspicion.

Calling him a fake, saying his performance was bungled, pointing out that he didn't understand «Natsuki Subaru» well enough, hearing that it was Emilia of all people who saw through it. The person he thought would be easiest to trick. It made him cry.

Forget being at a loss for words, his trampled heart was bleeding, and the agony filled his mind.

Being called a fake over and over made his heart ache—

"A Natsuki Subaru…knockoff…"

A pathetic fake. That thought poured a thick, dark emotion deep into his soul.

The negativity transformed into something vile, filling his heart. His knees that had been quivering quietly steadied. Instead, the depths of his eyes grew hot, lighting the fuse on those dark emotions.

The end of that fuse was what people called bloodlust.

"…So now it's a crime to go out for a walk at night?"

The moment he heeded that dark mass, Subaru's thoughts transformed, and he started issuing retorts.

He shrugged at her one-sided denunciation and looked around the room. And after making sure one more time that there was nothing behind the pedestal…

"This was the situation. You can understand wanting to go out for a stroll when your mind is dwelling on things. Somewhere without your sister…without Rem and Patrasche around."

"—Did you think you were unnoticed? No, you were *seen.*"

"——"

"It would seem that is another subject you failed to study. You aren't even worth talking to."

Subaru tried to feign an innocent explanation, but Ram held her finger to her lips, interrupting him. Whether coincidence or not, her gesture was the same as the one he'd made to Patrasche when leaving the green room.

Suddenly, the possibility that her use of the word *seen* had been meant literally started to look very high…

"Just cleanly admit your crime, your failure—"

Being completely cornered and being called that unforgivable word were the final push.

"—Ngh!"

Lowering his body, Subaru charged at Ram who was standing in the door. If he pushed her over, he intended to do the same thing he'd done to Meili.

He felt no compunction about killing her.

He'd already killed Meili. There wasn't much difference between one person and two. Besides, «she» had been a professional killer who had obediently taken countless lives when ordered to.

"—The balance of her left leg is bad."

Following his reliable advisor's timely advice, Subaru chose the best hand he had out of countless options. With a seasoned murderer's guidance—he could kill a girl without trouble.

"A barbaric and boring conclusion."

"——"

"Did you think cute little Ram would come to face such a barbaric man all by herself?"

Ram's voice was more pitiful than ridiculing as the atmosphere cracked.

The water in the atmosphere suddenly froze, producing a loud crack as the vapor in the air was forced to change phases—and the next instant, a powerful shock scooped him up from below.

"What?!"

Losing all grip on the ground, he couldn't keep his balance and tumbled backward. There were flashes of light in his eyes from the pain as the crackling continued and the air proceeded to freeze around him, until finally a cage surrounding him was completed.

It was whimsically beautiful, a cage made of ice—and Subaru was trapped inside.

"—It would have been better if it was all just a misunderstanding…"

And with Subaru trapped, Emilia appeared from behind Ram, looking at him with sad eyes.

5

—I messed up. I wasn't thinking. I shouldn't have come alone.

And as a result of that obvious progression, Subaru was left stunned and trapped in a cage like a monkey.

Ram and Emilia. It was only natural the two of them would cooperate. Unlike Subaru, they had the choice of working together. They were different from the start.

"Can't even keep up your flippant act after being cornered? You're a disgrace even to Barusu."

"———"

"This is why you couldn't even deceive Lady Emilia. Forget second-rate, you aren't even third-rate."

"That's a compliment, right? Thank you," Emilia said.

"…You're welcome."

I assume it was Emilia who made this ice cage. I did hear she was a mage, though never any details about her abilities.

A beautiful, silver-haired girl who used ice magic made for a mystical sort of combination, and he would have loved to compliment the pairing, but…

"They got the best of me…"

Subaru bitterly kicked the ice. It didn't budge at all. He didn't have the strength to break the cage. *Without a shovel, I'm not getting out of this.*

Meaning whether he lived or died was entirely up to Emilia.

"…What happened, Subaru? Why…?"

"That's…"

Even in that situation, Emilia was still earnestly asking what Subaru's motive was. It was the foolishness that was tails to her kindness's heads.

Of course Subaru had his excuse.

There was a reason why things had ended up like this. *But if I try to plead an act of God out of my control, no one would really believe that kind of grasping-at-straws excuse now.*

"Lady Emilia, it is a waste to even ask. It is unthinkable that he would answer our questions honestly, and it is dubious whether he should even be treated as Barusu."

"But Subaru is Subaru. You know that, too, right?"

"He is only a faulty replica that looks the same… That is my judgment."

Matching Subaru's thoughts, Ram chided Emilia's concern.

Kindness was a virtue, but without understanding the situation, it could also be a weakness. On that point, Ram was probably in agreement with Subaru. So there wouldn't be any mercy for him.

"You were the one who noticed I changed, right, Emilia-chan? So then why would you put your hopes in me like that? And also, what even clued you in?"

"…You really don't know? It's the same thing now."

"?"

Subaru couldn't understand the reason why she could tell the difference between him and the other «Natsuki Subaru». But they didn't seem to have any intention of conveniently explaining it, either.

Ram's pink eyes sharpened as she glared at Subaru inside the cage of ice.

"I have no interest in idle chat. Are you going to feel like spilling everything after a little pain?"

"Torture? You need more than a plain old sadistic streak for that, you know. It takes some specialist knowledge."

"If it's necessary, I'll do it. And while I don't take pleasure in causing pain—it is a specialty of mine."

Ram was merciless as Subaru tried to bluff from inside his small cell.

Her fingers were pale and slender, but her understated assertion sounded awfully convincing to Subaru's ears.

"—Wait. Don't do that. I won't let you."

But Emilia stood in front of the cage and spread her arms out, refusing to allow that violent conclusion to come to pass. Ram's brow furrowed as she faced Emilia.

"…Lady Emilia, you approved this, did you not?"

"I agreed about wanting to talk to him because he was behaving strangely. And I thought it might end up like this…which is why I wanted to be here myself."

"I asked Lady Beatrice to deal with Julius and Echidna because I didn't want it to come to this. You are being unreasonable, Lady Emilia… You are too naive."

Not hiding her frustration at the difference in opinions, Ram pointed past Emilia at Subaru and continued in a barbed voice.

"Do you understand? That is not Barusu. I heard what happened in Pristella…There was an archbishop there who was capable of freely changing shape and transforming into other people."

"…Yes. Changing back the people that archbishop transformed is part of the reason we came here in the first place."

"And what of the possibility that the same archbishop has taken Barusu's form?"

"That's…"

Ram logically and with careful reasoning tried to counter Emilia's emotional resistance.

Honestly, that was a false accusation, but he had no way of proving it. But more than that, Subaru—no, «she» felt a powerful aversion to that idea.

"—Ngh."

A flashback of vague memories. Not Natsuki Subaru's, but a fragment he'd seen in the book of the dead, a memory from when «she» had been «herself».

The countless terrible treatments «she» had undergone in the name of discipline.

The most terrifying one was having «her» body split into dozens of frogs.

Even though she had only one consciousness, she distinctly remembered the disparate shards of her being leaping all over the place, fleeing in every direction.

The terror of potentially never turning back to normal, the feeling of forgetting what that normal felt like, the complete loss of value of her existence and life… When she was changed back, she had thanked Mother from the bottom of her heart.

But at the same time, her spirit had broken completely, and she decided then and there to never disobey her mother.

"—Ngh."

Remembering that terror directly as if it had happened to him, Subaru was hit by an intense vertigo.

A person's identity is fundamentally connected with their appearance. Having that manipulated by someone else's will is a desecration.

It was one of the most loathsome things that could be done…

"Something that extreme isn't like you at all, Ram! That forced way of speaking, too!"

"Can you really say there is no chance? Just look at him…"

Their argument continued while the dizziness continued to assault Subaru. Ram was demanding a devil's proof. There could be proof of a positive statement, but no one could prove a negative statement.

This Natsuki Subaru was not the «Natsuki Subaru» that they wanted.

They had observed that much. And in order to explain that, Ram was pointing to the easy-to-understand theory involving a person known to possess the ability to shapeshift—but that was also an incredibly difficult explanation for the current Subaru to accept.

Unable to do anything with the antagonism welling inside him, Subaru groaned…

"We should make him speak at once! In order to find out where the real Barusu and Meili are."

"—Ah?"

His consciousness was ensnared by that unexpected outburst from Ram.

"———"

Raising his head, he saw the two of them arguing. He couldn't see Emilia's face since she was facing the other way, but he could see Ram's face clearly.

Her eyes burning with anger didn't feel like they were hiding a lie. She had meant every word.

Which means they haven't found Meili's corpse.

The reason they had lain in wait in order to catch him there was only because he had acted suspiciously and couldn't perform his «Natsuki Subaru» act perfectly.

Ram's seemingly inconsistent statements revealed that. But at the same time, he didn't understand.

If it wasn't them, then who moved Meili's corpse?

If there was some other plot, something going on besides just his plan and theirs…

"We can't just decide whether he is fake or not! Because the Subaru here is—"

"—I lost my memory!!!"

"Huh…?"

Grabbing the ice bars, Subaru interrupted their argument.

Ram's eyes widened at the unexpected shout. If his goal was to surprise her, it would have been a success, but that wasn't the point. It was just a shout.

Subaru's confused, unsure plea, not knowing what would happen to him if he said it.

"What drivel is this now…"

Coming back to her senses, Ram's face filled with rage.

As far as she was concerned, what Subaru just said was a painfully frustrating lie—one so obvious that it wouldn't achieve anything beyond wasting time.

But even if Ram thought that—

"Ram! See what Subaru said! There really was a reason!"

"Are you serious, Lady Emilia?! There's no reason at all to believe him!"

Emilia took his side when she heard it.

If it was just her clinging to an absurd opinion, Ram would have ignored it without a thought.

But Emilia's face tensed at Ram's obstinate denial.

"There is a reason to believe it! The reason is all the time we've spent with him!!!"

"—!"

There was a pained look on Ram's face.

For just a moment, there was doubt in her pink eyes. But she shook off that hesitation through sheer force of will.

"—What about Rem?"

"Ah…"

In that moment, Emilia faltered in the face of Ram's glistening eyes, and the situation started moving.

Lowering her body, Ram kicked, aiming to sweep Emilia's legs. Emilia dodged by leaping backward, but Ram advanced and grabbed her wrist.

Not allowing her to resist, she spun Emilia's arm and sent her flying.

"Don't get in my way!"

"Kyah?!"

Emilia cried out as she did a flip and landed on her feet, avoiding tumbling to the ground. But as she landed, her foot touched down on the shoe that Ram had taken off and she slipped.

Stumbling, Emilia was slow to react. In that opening, Ram pulled out a wand and held it out through the ice bars, pointing it right in front of Subaru's nose.

"Tell me one more time that you forgot."

"Tha…no…that's not…"

"Tell me you forgot Rem one more time. With that voice, wearing that face…"

Ram was gritting her teeth. He could see the atmosphere warping around the tip of her trembling wand.

He couldn't see it, but most likely that was mana gathering in order to activate some magic. But the words—the action—to make her stop wouldn't come.

He couldn't think of the words to stop Ram, to stop the tears of the girl in front of him who looked like she was about to cry.

—If it was «Natsuki Subaru» instead of Natsuki Subaru, would he have been able to find the words?

"Stop, Ram! Don't!"

Emilia shouted as she regained her balance and rushed to stop Ram.

But she wouldn't make it in time.

"________"

A white light flashed on the other side of the ice bars, and the blast swallowed Subaru up.

His body slammed backward into the ice bars, and he hit the back of his head.

"—Ngh."

His head slumped and his consciousness faded.

Natsuki Subaru fell unconscious, not even managing to offer an excuse—

× × ×

"—Ugh?"

With a faint, weak groan he gradually regained consciousness.

Slowly, slowly, rising through a dark mire. It felt like a vast, boundless space, but gradually it picked up speed and started to feel real, until finally…

"—Ngh ahh?! Owwww?!"

The moment he woke up, it was like his consciousness had been grabbed by the collar and dragged up. A sharp pain exploded behind his eyes as he leapt up from the hard floor and opened his eyes.

"Oww… That hurts. What…what is this…?"

Looking for the cause of the pain, he reached up to his left shoulder. The moment he touched it, the sharp pain made the world around him go red. *I can't move it at all.*

"Is it…dislocated…? I've never dislocated a shoulder before…"

Past his shoulder, his arm stopped moving how he wanted. He tried moving the arm with his other hand, but even touching it hurt, so he just stood up carefully not to jostle it.

"This is…the room…"

Where Meili died. The room I was in before I passed out.

As proof, the cage of ice Emilia had made was still there behind him. Strangely, though, he had been on the ground outside it. From the look of things, there was no sign of the cage being opened, and there should have been no way of slipping through the ice bars, but…

"…That's why the shoulder…?"

Getting that far, he realized the connection.

Looking at the gaps between the bars, it was clear that it wasn't impossible to forcibly slip through. In fact, it looked downright doable with a dislocated shoulder. The problem was just how it had happened.

And—

"—Where did Emilia and Ram go?"

The two girls who had been arguing and fighting before he passed out were nowhere to be found. It was unnatural.

—No, more than just unnatural, it's scary.

Subaru had been knocked out, his shoulder dislocated, Emilia and Ram had disappeared. He looked around the room, trying to figure out what had happened while he was out—

Natsuki Subaru was here.

When he saw a familiar line carved into the wall.

The stone wall had been carved out raggedly, hammered into a bare canvas.

He saw the shattered stone pedestal out of the corner of his eye. The letters in the wall had been seemingly carved using that. But if that was all, it wouldn't have had the same impact as the message carved into his arm.

He would have just laughed it off as a disappointing rehash.

But—

Natsuki Subaru was here.

Natsuki Subaru was here. Natsuki Subaru was here.

Natsuki Subaru was here. Natsuki Subaru was here. Natsuki Subaru was here.

Natsuki Subaru was here. Natsuki Subaru was here. Natsuki Subaru was here. Natsuki Subaru was here. Natsuki Subaru was here. Natsuki Subaru was here. Natsuki Subaru was here. Natsuki Subaru was here. Natsuki Subaru was here. Natsuki Subaru was here. Natsuki Subaru was here…

Every wall of the room was filled with that pathological message.

It was understandable he hadn't noticed it at first. The message had been engraved so tenaciously, so carefully filling every space on the wall, that it made it seem like that was just something decorating the wall.

Why did someone write…

"—Ah? The hell is this? This is one nasty lookin' room. What'd you do to this place, huh?"

"______"

Subaru shuddered in terror when he heard a voice behind him.

It wasn't that he couldn't sense his presence. His entire attention was just completely consumed by the letters on the wall. He wouldn't have noticed anyone who approached.

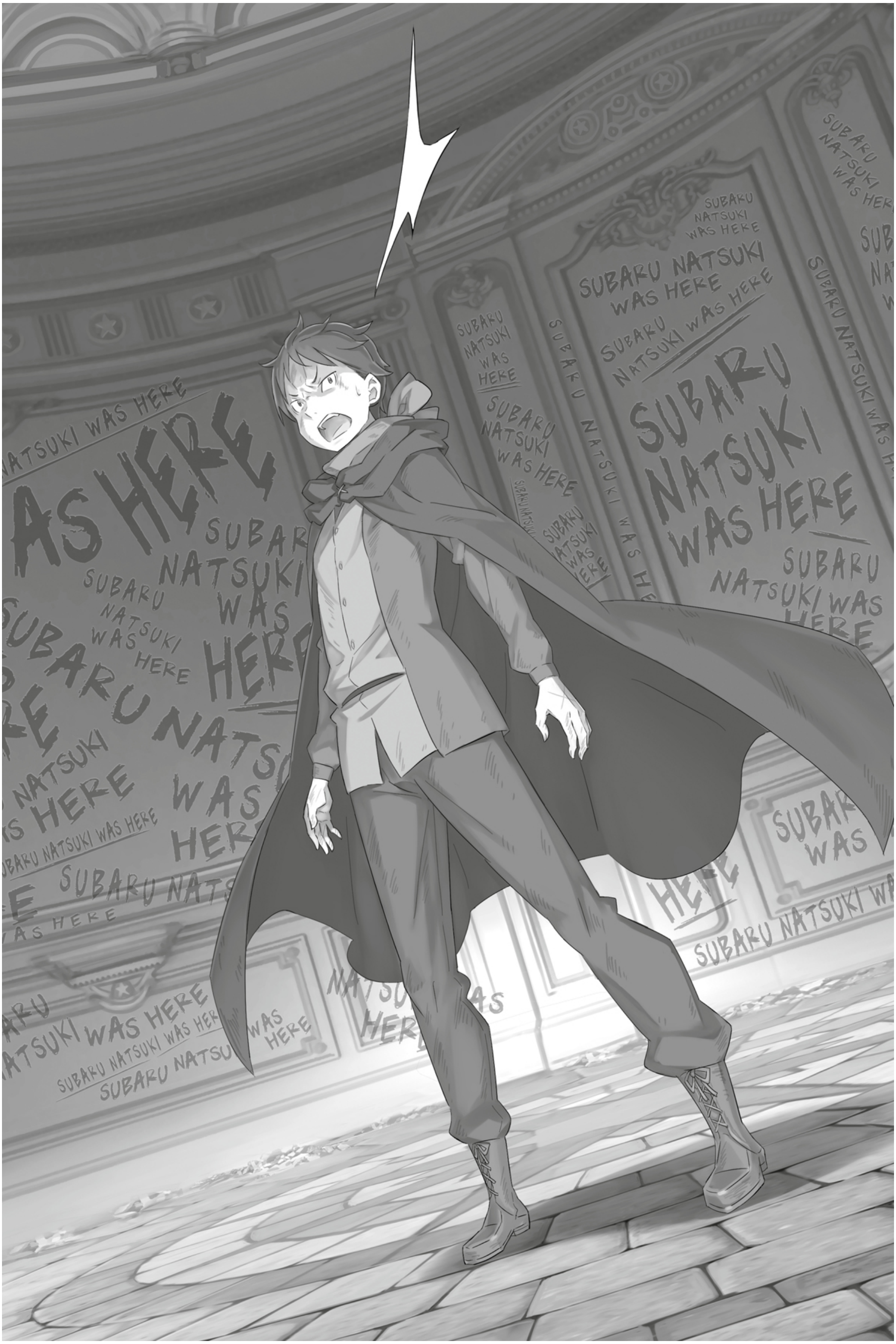
That wasn't what stunned Subaru.

What stunned him was that he remembered that coarse and brash voice.

"What are you doin' starin' into space here, small fry? A guppy who gets separated from the pack is just prey for the big fish."

Subaru couldn't turn around as the shark-like red-haired man laughed.

—The man who shouldn't have been able to be there was laughing.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CHAPTER 6

RE:ZERO -LIFE STARTS IN ANOTHER WORLD-

1

Hearing that familiar voice, he immediately forgot about the pain in his shoulder.

The fear and cowardice and negativity that filled his head and the hopeless *why* drowning out all thought became a tempest rocking his mind.

Why was his shoulder dislocated? Why was “Natsuki Subaru was here” written all over the walls? Why were Emilia and Ram not there? Why had Meili’s corpse disappeared from its hiding place? Why had he lost his memory? Why had he been summoned to another world? Why had he not been able to tell his parents the truth?

Why, why, why, why, why, why, why—

“What are you curlin’ up for? Don’t go quiet on me. You’re a real piece o’ work, aren’t ya?”

—Why was that man standing right there when he wasn’t supposed to be able to come down?

“Hah. What’s wrong with your face? You scared? You gonna cry? I gotta say, though, hanging out in this disgustin’ room must mean you’re one real sicko.”

With his long red hair, the patch over his left eye, his bare chest and the white sarashi around his torso, his body like forged steel, he looked down at a pathetic Subaru.

The guardian of the Pleiades Watchtower’s second floor, Electra—Reid Astrea.

“What? Your shoulder’s dislocated. I thought you looked out of shape.”

“Grgh, gaaaaah…!”

The next moment, a sudden shock scorched Subaru’s mind.

Looking down, he saw Reid had casually grabbed his dislocated shoulder and violently twisted his arm, forcibly popping it back into its socket.

There was a dull, visceral thump as the bones realigned, and then

Subaru's left arm could move again.

But the pain that had receded for a brief moment came rushing back and the renewed agony made his eyes water.

"Oy, quit the overactin'. You're makin' it look like I'm bullyin' you. But the babe's the one who did that, not me."

"Babe…?"

"I can guess from the ice cage and your shoulder. You guys have a fallin' out? That's funny."

Laughing scornfully, Reid scanned the room. From what he said, Subaru understood he was talking about Emilia. But he also recognized an abnormal perception to figure that much out from just a glance.

"H-how can you tell that…?"

"In a bleak-ass place like this, the only things a guy and girl can do are start gettin' too close or start fightin' too much. It ain't hard to figure out."

The man's logic was a little too crude to call it a sound argument. When Subaru didn't respond, Reid looked away and started casually warming up and stepping on the floor.

"—Well, looks like I can move a bit at least. Good enough."

With that final comment, he slowly started walking out of the room, as if Subaru didn't even exist anymore.

Subaru frantically chased after him.

"Wait! You…I thought you weren't supposed to be able to leave the floor up there? How are you wandering around down here like it's normal?!"

Subaru glared at Reid's back, spouting the first question that came to mind. Reid just waved his hand dismissively without turning around.

"When did I ever say I couldn't leave the second floor? …Nah, just kiddin'. You weren't wrong assumin' I couldn't just go out for a stroll. It's just that assumption broke down is all."

"The what…broke down? Wh-why?!"

"I'm not plannin' on teachin' you every last thing. I can walk around. And you can wet yourself like a baby. That's it. The end. No, actually that's not the end."

Stopping, Reid's voice suddenly changed tone. A powerful gaze that could cut down someone with just a glare was brought to bear on Subaru.

"I happen to be lookin' for something right now. Where are your friends?"

Subaru's eyes widened at that unexpected question. Seeing that pathetic reaction,

"You…" Reid violently scratched his head. "Listenin'? I'm gonna leave this tower, but I need food and water. And booze. And girls, too, obviously. I'm lookin' for the babe and that slutty chick in your group. I'd feel a bit guilty makin' a pass on that babe, so the slutty one'd be best."

"Leave…? This tower? But then, you…the examination…no, isn't there a lot of stuff? Like the general situation right now? What are you gonna do about all that?!"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about. You can clean up your own mess. It's got nothin' to do with me. Ah, actually. There is one thing."

"One thing…ghah?!"

Reid sneered and flicked Subaru's forehead.

"Dumbass. I told you already, don't just go assumin' I'll just give you every answer. What are you, some baby bird? You a small fry or a hatchling? Take care of your own business."

"Your problem with definitions—"

"Just 'cause I conveniently happened to get out, don't go makin' me the cover for all your doubts and regrets and all that crap. Clean up after yourself. Don't use me to console yourself."

"———"

It was something that couldn't really be described as annoyance.

To be annoyed required feeling something, but Subaru's existence didn't even register in Reid's mind. His emotions weren't going to move because of someone he didn't register. So there was no annoyance in his voice.

But it was still more than enough to shred Subaru's heart—

"—Ah, there he is."

As Subaru fell silent, Reid grinned. His straw sandals pushed against the floor, and he started walking straight down the passage without any hesitation.

Seeing him move away with big steps, Subaru snapped back to reality and frantically chased after him.

His shoulder hurt, there was doubt in his mind, he was driven by a passive sense of duty rather than anything proactive, but Subaru had no choice other than to follow this man.

—Where it stopped was at the end of the passage where it was possible look out at the spiral staircase leading down.

"———"

Desperately chasing Reid, his eyes widened when he realized it.

It was the fateful place where Natsuki Subaru had been pushed to his death twice before. Just looking down took a burst of courage for him. But Subaru forgot his fear of death when he saw the scene unfolding down below.

—The spiral staircase room was filled with monsters shrouded in flame. The place had been transformed into some kind of hell.

"…Hah?"

Writhing, crimson flames and the discordant noise of countless babies crying. It merged with his racing heartbeat, and the pandemonium that he hadn't heard before exploded into his head.

"

Reid's words were filled with the logic of the strong, a carnivore dominating an herbivore. It was the logic of the strong that wouldn't work for Subaru, the impassable gulf that separated the weak and the strong.

"Hah."

Snorting when Subaru failed to answer, Reid leaned forward.

There was no time to stop him. Reid threw himself out into the air without hesitation. Reid embarked on the same one-way trip to death that Subaru had taken.

Recreating the same speed and height that Natsuki Subaru would unavoidably have died from, Reid fell as if sucked down into the inferno below, falling and falling—

"——!!"

Hit by a sandaled stomp, a centaur's torso crumpled. The impact broke all four of its legs and the crushed demon beast turned into a gruesome black stain on the floor.

And the attacker was lively and unhurt.

"———"

Even the unthinking demon beasts were cowed by his presence and very obviously on their guard. When the red-haired swordsman violently entered the fray, all of the centaurs' cries stopped at once.

Focus shifted to him. Not just the swarm of demon beasts burning everything down, but also the knight who had been so valiantly acting as their opponent: Julius Juukulius.

"…Why are you here?"

"Why, how, what—you guys really love your questions, huh? There's more than that to life, ain't there? Like the trick to bein' popular with girls, or brands of good booze, or 'how are you so strong.'"

Reid wiped away the flesh from the bottom of his sandal, and then turned his hand toward another centaur standing near him. In his hand he was holding a thin wooden stick like some sort of joke—it almost looked like a chopstick.

"The trick for being popular with women is looks. A good booze to try is a liquor called Gramhilde. And as for why I'm the strongest in the world, that's cause I'm me."

Saying that, Reid started lightly moving the chopstick he pulled out.

The next instant, cracks formed all over the centaur that had stopped moving, and blood erupted from it. The demon beast was slow to realize its body was being destroyed and howled at the death-bringing pain.

It sounded like a dying baby's shriek. Just horrifically disgusting. If there was a designer who had created the demon beast, they'd earned every bit of the title *tasteless*.

And the man who caused it all was still grinning as he turned the chopstick toward Julius. Reid flashed a big, mocking grin as Julius's yellow eyes widened while they locked onto the tip of the stick.

"—Now, let's continue your examination. Try to take it from me before I get bored."

—A horrific sword dance began with the fifth-floor atrium as a stage.

Reid's long red hair leaped through the air as he freely and perfectly controlled his burly body, using just a short, weak wooden stick to perform an unbelievable feat.

The half-human, half-horse demon beasts shrouded in a furious flame charged at Reid as he howled. Gripping flaming lances in both hands, the centaurs tried to slay him with an outrageous level of firepower.

But Reid parried it all with his sticks and without a single scorch mark. The reason that weak little wooden stick could withstand such intense heat was obvious. They were being swung so fast there was no chance for them to catch fire.

"Sorasorasorasorasorasora! What's wrong! Are you just playing around! This is your chance now! Use your friends to get your revenge on me! Oraoraoraoraoraora!"

Stirring up a noisy mess, Reid carved lethal wounds into the charging demon beasts' bodies with his wooden sticks. But as far as Reid was concerned, that superhuman feat was just a side act.

His real interest was solely absorbed by Julius, the knight struggling against that human-shaped manifestation of violence.

"What are you thinking?! With so many demon beasts emerging from underground! With the tower in such a terrible state, this is a situation where we should be combining our strength!"

"Hah! So the thinking matches that nice-guy sword, huh. Do you like livin' like that? In my experience, guys who just do what they want are stronger and have more fun than guys who hold back."

"What…"

"'Sides, what's the problem if a few nasty burning horses start runnin' around? No different than a little rain. If anything, rain's more annoying since it messes up my hair."

He laughed off the rational logic of common sense with a villain's mad logic.

Faced with a philosophy he couldn't understand, Julius looked baffled for a moment before an intense emotion filled his eyes—

"Kah! There it is. That look there. That face ain't half-bad."

"—Ngh."

"But you forgot to watch your feet. Well, from my perspective, you aren't payin' enough attention to anythin'."

Reid grinned savagely as his kick landed straight on Julius's stomach.

He was in the same position as Reid, having to deal with both the demon beasts and an enemy, but there was a clear difference in motivation between the two of them, and the gap was only widened by the difference in their strength.

Sent flying by the kick, Julius slammed into the wall. The impact shook the tower itself, and the swarm of monsters bore down on him as he fell to his knee.

“Khah!”

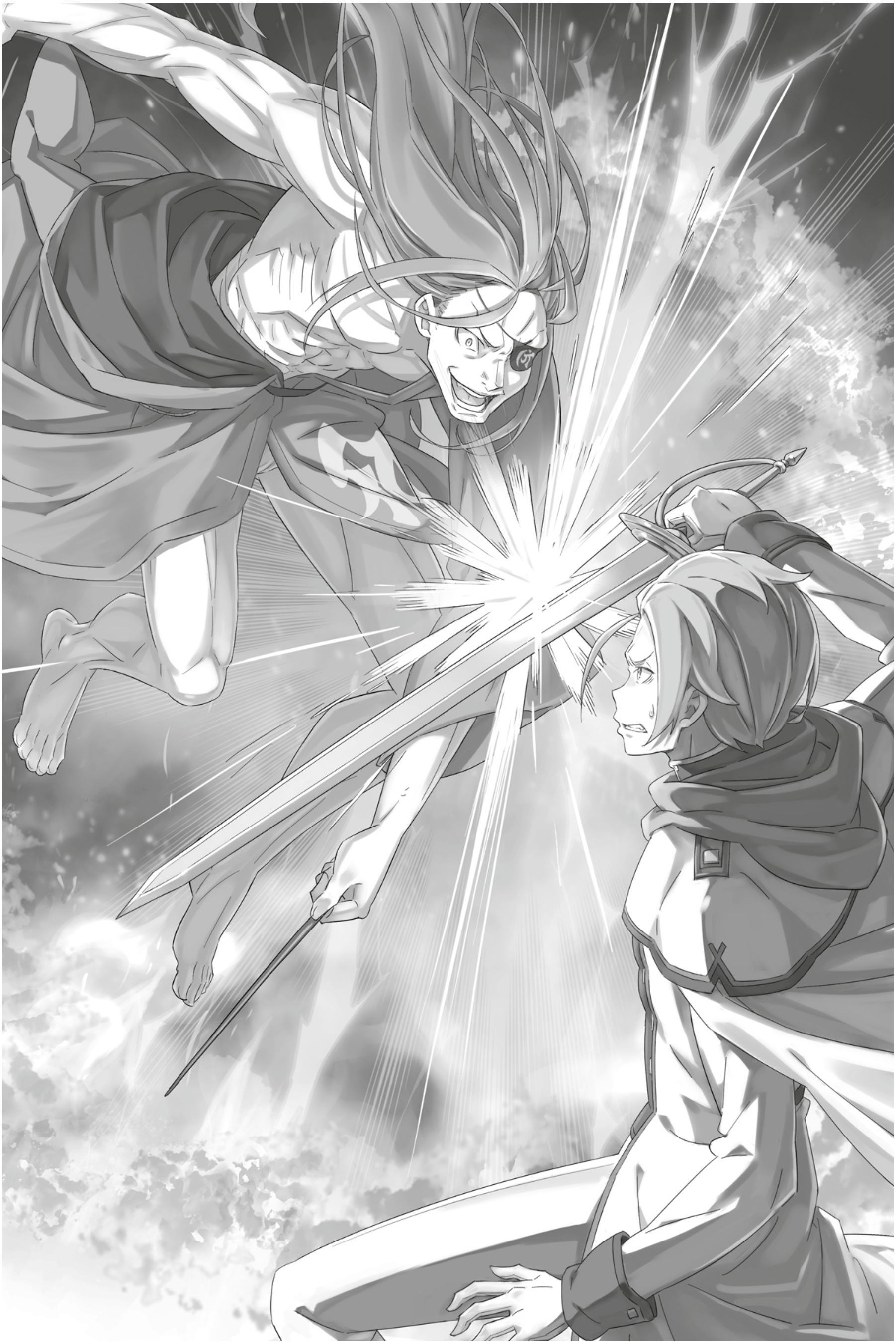
As the deadly horde approached rapidly, Julius forcefully evaded with some impressive legwork. Breaking through the net of centaurs by stepping on their bodies, he pointed his left hand at the demon beasts below him—

—And nothing happened. Clenching his hand, his expression twisted in anguish.

“—You’re *still* not gettin’ serious, even now.”

In a flash, Reid appeared between Julius and the demon beasts, raising a storm with his two wooden sticks.

The wild gale sent some dozen centaurs into the air, turning them into gruesome chunks and splattering them in the span of two seconds—that deadly swarm of demon beasts was slaughtered without a single chance.



"In that case, there's nothin' to get from playin' with you. I'm out then. I was a bit curious about what I had left on the plate, but if it's still not ripe, then there's not much point."

"Wait, what do you mean, leave?! You would just abandon this tower in this situation?!"

"Don't make me repeat myself. Who would let a little rain stop them from goin' out to play? 'Sides, this place is just full of boring dipshits. The only one who could play with me was that one babe… You aren't even fit to entertain me."

"—Ngh."

Grinding his teeth, Julius's temper flared. But he hesitated to vent it.

If he let his fury explode now, he would lose any chance of restraining Reid. In which case, there would be no way of restoring peace and order to the tower with everything that had suddenly happened.

"There's no helpin' that nature."

Julius's expression froze at that complete disappointment.

The complex feelings in Julius's eyes were pitiful, like a child seeing the summit he'd set out for hidden by the clouds. That heartache was not something for others to see.

—But right in that moment, as the inferno boiling up from below threatened to incinerate Julius, the mediocre man watching the battlefield from above could see it clearly.

"…Ah…"

When it was already too late, having watched the battle from above, Natsuki Subaru realized he'd been so entranced by the battle below that he'd forgotten to breathe.

The amazement at how brokenly powerful Reid was, being in awe of him was only natural. But seeing Julius's swordsmanship and how he fought for the first time, there was no opening for him to take advantage of. It was the fruit of constant, unwavering training.

If they were to face each other, Subaru would lose miserably without leaving so much as a scratch on him. Even in a match with wooden swords, Julius would pummel him without breaking a sweat.

—Given Subaru's strength, he'd never be able to read Julius's book of the dead.

"Then right now is the perfect chance to let him die."

The girl's sweet voice whispered to him in the back of his mind.

The ranks of the demon beasts annihilated by Reid were being refilled by the reinforcements swelling from down below. As Julius froze there, he didn't notice an attack unleashed by one of them.

At that rate, he would be scorched by the centaur's flames and die. If that happened, Subaru should have been able to read his book when it appeared in the archive.

The girl was right. This random situation was the best chance to have him die—

"—Behind you, Julius!!!"

"—Ngh!"

Hearing his voice, Julius's body started moving again, and he evaded the attack. The flames grazed him before hitting the floor, raising the inferno's heat.

"

himself.

It was almost the exact same as what he’d said earlier.

But there was maybe a slightly different tone to it this time.

3

—Why did I do that?

"Letting someone die wouldn't leave the same feeling in your hands as doing the deed yourself."

Gasping for air as he ran, a sweet, unhappy voice interrupted his self-doubt. The hallucination nestled into his ear, cursing Subaru's selfishness.

"Even though you strangled me."

He had no rebuttal. He was being contradictory. It didn't make any sense.

If he really wanted the books of the dead, he should have abandoned Julius. And yet in the end, he'd given Julius the warning to escape the flames.

It was only natural that the girl he'd strangled with his own two hands wouldn't forgive that—

"—Subaru!"

Suddenly, a voice stopped him. The voice came from an intersection in the hall that he'd passed by without notice—a small figure ran out from the hall.

"Betty was looking for you! There is a demon beast that way! You can't go there!"

"B-Beatrice…? And…"

Beatrice's dress swished as she ran over, an earnest expression on her face. Subaru felt both relief and shock seeing a second person safe.

And the shock didn't stop there.

"…Running into you of all people here, Natsuki."

Echidna's breathing was slightly ragged as she followed Beatrice.

It was an unexpected pairing, but what made Subaru's heart clamp down harder was the extreme suspicion in Echidna's eyes.

It was a natural suspicion. Julius and Beatrice's attitudes were the stranger ones.

—If she knew what he'd said to Emilia and Ram in the room where Meili's body had been hidden, then her reaction was entirely reasonable.

"Beatrice, you must've heard, too. I…"

"—Ngh, this isn't the time for that! Come this way!"

"Are you serious, Beatrice?! He got out of the cage! And at a time like this!"

Grabbing Subaru's arm as he looked down, Beatrice tried to pull him over when Echidna stopped her. Her cautiousness rising, she pointed at Subaru's head.

Her fingertip felt almost like the barrel of a gun as he gulped. But Beatrice stood right in front of Echidna as if to protect him.

"Out of the way, Beatrice! You heard Ram. He is not the boy you know!"

"That isn't true! If Betty holds his hand…Betty can tell! The contract between us is still alive! Betty won't allow you to deny that bond!"

"…Even so, he can't be trusted. He hasn't given any kind of reasonable explanation, has he?"

Gritting her teeth, Echidna brushed off Beatrice's statement.

The violent emotion caused by unease and impatience was completely at odds with the impression Subaru had gotten from Echidna. She was desperate. She was desperate to protect something.

Understanding that he was the cause of that extreme emotion, Subaru took a breath.

And…

"…What are you doing?"

Pushing down on Beatrice's shoulder, Subaru stepped forward, leaving himself defenseless. Echidna was suspicious, but Subaru just shook his head. He didn't have anything prepared.

"As you can see, I'm giving up… This tower is already done for."

He judged that everything was already well beyond his ability to handle. He was way in over his head and too many things he couldn't begin to do anything about had sprung up. He was waving the white flag, surrendering.

But Echidna took that for something else entirely.

"This tower is…? So you've already achieved what you set out for?"

"…Achieved…?"

"Don't play dumb! Your goal was the witch in the shrine, wasn't it?! You got what you wanted, that's why you showed your true colors… I should have trusted Ana's instinct. I shouldn't have brought anyone else here with me! I screwed up…!"

Subaru was bewildered. She was seeing something Subaru couldn't see at all. And he doubted whether he was related to it in any way.

"…Whatever. This world is already doomed."

"What's wrong, Subaru?! That isn't like you at all!"

"Like…me?"

Beatrice tugged at his sleeve as he tried to abandon everything. Hearing a tearful plea, Subaru looked at her.

"What is that supposed to mean? Where is the usual me that you're always looking at?"

"…Do you really intend to hold onto that terrible lie? Ram's forgotten her sister and Julius has been forgotten by everyone, and you still pull that cruel act!"

"Act? Act?! You think this is some goddamned act?!"

All of a sudden, rage filled Subaru's voice, drowning out Echidna's shout. Glaring at Echidna as she faltered under the sheer force of it, Subaru bared his teeth.

"If I was going to pretend to be someone, I'd damn sure pick someone better, wouldn't I?! Who! Who would want to be «Natsuki Subaru» of all people! Who would want to be this disgusting asshole!"

Who would want to become «Natsuki Subaru» if he had any choice at all? Who would want to be this twisted, unbearable «Natsuki Subaru»—

"I don't know any of you! Not a single one! I lost everything! I was on the way home from the convenience store! The only thing I remember from today is talking to the shop clerk! And then I'm suddenly in some other world? A tower in a desert? Corpses? Examinations! Fakes! «Natsuki Subaru»! It's all bullshit!"

"______"

"That's right! It's all my fault! I wanted to be anywhere else! I didn't want to go home! I was scared of putting on that mask again and causing even more problems for my mom and dad! I was even excited at first! But only at first!"

Beatrice and Echidna froze in place as they watched Subaru explode. They couldn't understand. They didn't know the anguish Subaru was feeling. There was a gap between them that couldn't be filled.

Subaru, them, neither could help the other. It was an unbridgeable chasm.

"You wanna know why I suddenly snapped? Well even I don't know! But I hit my limit! I've had it with people telling me what I am! Whatever you want from me, I can't do anything! Nothing! So!"

"______"

"So…just forgive me. Please just forgive me. Please just let me go home… If God is trying to punish me, I understand…I was wrong."

His voice went hoarse, and there was a bitterness that stung the back of his nose as Subaru crouched down and curled up.

Pressing his head against the floor, he begged for forgiveness. He didn't know who he needed to ask, so he prayed. With the names of every god he knew in his heart, he prayed.

If this is a punishment for my laziness, then please forgive me.

I'm sure I've reflected on and regretted my choices enough to change my life.

So please, please forgive me.

Please don't mix anyone else up in my divine punishment.

I don't want to be hurt anymore and I don't want to hurt anyone else *anymore.*

“______”

Beatrice and Echidna were silent as he knelt there and made his tearful plea.

Moving close to him, Beatrice gently rubbed his rounded back. For some reason, she doggedly refused to abandon him.

“…I don’t trust you…”

In contrast to Beatrice’s hand, Echidna’s voice was stiff and cold.

“Cry and plead all you want, if you can’t resolve any of my doubts, my answer won’t change. I am going to get Ana back, even if that means earning the hate or blame of whoever. I don’t care.”

“______”

“…But I want to be able to look Ana in the eyes once she’s back.”

Echidna slowly lowered the finger she had pointed at Subaru, and then she slowly shook her head.

“Beatrice, just go with him. I’m going to search for Julius. If possible, let’s meet at the top.”

“…Got it. Come on Subaru, stand up now. Betty will carry you if she has to.”

She couldn’t trust him, but also wouldn’t kill him. So going their separate ways was the most Echidna could bend. Beatrice tried to lend Subaru her tiny shoulder to lean on.

With a struggle, she managed to get Subaru’s body up. He exhaled. And—

“—What are you doing?”

Closing one eye, Echidna looked down at her sleeve. Subaru’s hand reached out to grab her white sleeve, not letting her go.

Why did I do that?

“I thought I made my compromise clear. So why are you doing this?”

“…Julius asked me.”

“He did? Don’t be stupid. He… No, he would do that…” For just a moment, Echidna hesitated when she heard Subaru’s tearful voice. “But you met him before getting here? He should have gone down to check on the fifth floor. If he met you there, then… No, more importantly, he asked you? Is he…”

“Ah, uh, no, you…”

Subaru was overwhelmed by the swift barrage of questions.

“How pathetic, mister… Why did you stop her?”

The girl’s ghost watched in disappointment as Subaru in his fear struggled to respond. Her gaze cut into his heart, making it harder and harder to speak.

Subaru didn’t have an answer to the girl’s question. Why had he stopped Echidna?

He had remembered Julius's shout. It hadn't even been a promise, so why—

"…Ah…"

Avoiding Echidna's gaze, Subaru looked past her as she grew annoyed at his lack of a response. That was when he saw it. A red light floating down the hallway.

The moment he saw the red light, he instinctively understood. He had met its eyes.

The massive black body that was one with the darkness, the gleaming red light, the pair of abnormally developed, sharp pincers, the raised, articulated tail's stinger gleaming with a white beam—

"Huh."

—With a flash, the giant scorpion's stinger became a light that shot through the hallway.

4

—The flying stinger shattered the passage, filling it with billowing smoke and absolute destruction.

Experiencing it all in slow motion, Subaru saw the little girl in her elaborate dress leap into the middle of the terrible destruction.

“—Incomplete EMT!”

One hand holding Subaru’s, she held the other out in front of her.

The next instant, he felt something invisible flowing out of his body and into Beatrice. His head clouded from the loss of that massive amount of something. In exchange, Beatrice’s palm exerted a tremendous force against the streak of white closing in on them.

“———”

It looked like some sort of wall of light had been created. It stopped the white streak destroying the stone construction of the tower while diverting it to fly past them.

A thunderclap roared in his ears, his consciousness wavered, and he shouted while wondering what sort of hell he had stumbled into.

Protected behind the little girl’s back, clinging to the life he had tried to give up. *Why am I alive?*

“—Ugh, aahh!”

As he cursed his luck, he was brought back to his senses by a faint groan. It came from Echidna who had lost her balance from the enemy’s unexpected and furious attack.

But there was no floor to support her in the direction she was falling. The passage had been shattered by the attack and there was a massive hole in the ground. And Echidna’s body was being sucked into it.

She immediately stretched out her hand, but there was nothing to grab. She could do nothing but fall through the floor to her death—if Subaru hadn’t grabbed her hand.

“Natsuki?!”

“Guoooooooh!”

His left arm holding Echidna’s weight was the same one that Reid had put back into its socket after it had been dislocated. He gritted his teeth against the jolt of pain. Echidna was petite, but if he lost focus, they would both end up falling.

Why did I take that risk?

“…Could you not do such unpredictable things?”

“Who asked…you…! It was reflex…!”

“That answer…sounds a lot like you!”

Echidna pointed her other arm at the ceiling.

Looking up, he understood what she was doing. There was a black shadow crawling along the ceiling, approaching them from above.

Seeing the giant scorpion swing its pincer, Subaru's thoughts gradually accelerated.

Ordinarily, the deadly stinger was the standard image associated with scorpions, but out of the hundreds of species of scorpions, only a few dozen possessed powerful venom. In which case, what did all those other scorpions use to hunt? The answer was their brutal pincers.

If that got them, it would easily cut through Subaru or Beatrice's body—

"El Jiwaldo!"

All five of Echidna's fingers gleamed and five rays of light erupted from them, searing the scorpion's pincers, face, shell. Unable to withstand the force, the scorpion withdrew immediately.

As if fleeing in a panic, there was an audible thud from one of its pincers being left behind.

"Jiwaldo! Jiwaldo Jiwaldo, Jiwaldoooo!"

"Wait! Calm down Echidna! It's gone! It ran away! It's already gone!"

Still dangling over the abyss, Echidna unleashed a barrage of attacks. Subaru desperately called out to her as he raised her body. She had gotten agitated and confused, but finally she slumped, resting her body weight on Subaru.

"Hah, hah, hah, d-did that get it…?"

"…Unlikely. It probably got away."

He felt bad given how Echidna seemed so pleased with herself, but the scorpion had almost certainly escaped to the other side of the billowing smoke. He was on edge, almost waiting for the moment the smoke split to herald the imminent counterattack.

"But…looks like there won't be one…? What was that…"

"—A demon beast. A boorish sort that suddenly appeared on the fourth floor. The problem is not that, it's that there has seemingly been a change both upstairs and down."

"Up, down, and in the middle. So there are problems on all the floors then?"

Subaru bit his lip at Beatrice's grave report.

Julius was fighting the demon beasts on the fifth floor; there was a giant scorpion encounter on the fourth floor. And Reid coming down from his floor probably had something to do with the disturbance upstairs, too.

"…One of those problems is you, though you don't seem to realize it."

Echidna stood up, pulling away from Subaru's chest with that merciless aside. She wiped the sweat on her brow, still regarding him with the same suspicion as before.

"What…are you? What do you want and whose side are you on?"

"I don't know. It doesn't make any sense to me, either. Since I…"

"—lost your memories."

Beatrice finished his sentence. He hadn't mentioned that to them, so it must have been something they heard from Emilia and Ram.

Knowing that, Beatrice protected Subaru, and Echidna didn't try to push him on it.

As if to back that up, Echidna seemed to be thinking something, and hesitantly…

"…Why did you save me just now? If you hadn't grabbed my hand, I would have fallen to my death. It would have been a pathetic death for me and Ana's body."

"…It was reflex. I don't know."

Julius's plea *had* crossed his mind. But that'd been a factor earlier, when she was about to go off on her own, not when she was about to fall. The reason he'd reached out to grab her hand was simply instinct.

"It's not like there's a reason for everything. It was sudden and I just…"

"…Maybe that's your nature."

"Eh…?"

Echidna's shoulders untensed.

Subaru was confused by the way that sounded, but Echidna shrugged and sighed.

"There's no point getting into an argument here. And staying here longer to give the demon beast another chance to attack would be stupid. Let's move. I want to get to Julius."

"Agreed. For now, we should get away from here. Quickly," Beatrice confirmed.

"Ah, huh…?"

Echidna and Beatrice quickly settled on a plan of action that Subaru's mind failed to follow. And Beatrice's little hand grabbed Subaru's as if checking something.

He gulped at the feeling as she looked at him with her blue eyes.

"You don't remember bringing Betty out?"

"…S-sorry, I don't know what you're talking about."

"—It's okay."

He could hear something terribly fragile and lonely in her voice, feeling like he had committed the worst possible sin in this world. But even as he was racked by that mysterious guilt, Beatrice smiled boldly.

"Even if you forget, it is still inside Betty. The things that you built will never fade. So it's fine for now."

"Beatrice…"

"Even if you forget, Betty won't. Betty will always remember. And Betty will make you remember. Betty will do whatever it takes to make that happen."

It was too dazzling for Natsuki Subaru to answer.

How much adversity had she overcome to forge such a steely spirit? How had a little girl developed such a noble, sublime will?

"Ah…"

Overwhelmed by it all, he struggled to hold back the heat welling up in the back of his eyes. Beatrice didn't say anything about his fierce struggle. She simply supported him with the feeling of her hand in his.

By simply holding his hand, she became a rock-solid pillar of support.

"Let's move. We can't come back the way we came, so the only choice is the direction the demon beast fled."

"Echidna, you…"

"Save the talk of suspicions and forgiveness for later. My suspicion isn't gone. But the current situation takes priority. Knowing when and where is a crucial ability for a merchant. I've seen the truth of that with my own eyes."

So no more pushing for answers for now. That was her conclusion.

Subaru respected Echidna's rejection and willingness to yield on that, so he didn't bring it up again, either.

"The floor has gotten weak, so be careful. And watch out for the pincer that scorpion dropped, too."

Watching the ground, Echidna got her revenge for earlier. Following her finger, Subaru saw the giant scorpion pincer that had been cut off by her heat ray lying on the ground. With how massive and dangerous it appeared, it almost seemed fake.

Lifting Beatrice, Subaru stepped carefully over the pincer.

Beatrice's body was light. She looked only eleven or twelve, but she was too light for a girl that age. And it wasn't just because of the strength he'd apparently gotten in the year he couldn't remember—

"Bea—"

Noticing something off, he started to say something when it happened.

Beneath him, the scorpion's giant pincer started shuddering—and then a light erupted.

5

—There is a behavior in nature called autotomy.

It's something generally seen in arthropods and lizards, where the animal removes a piece of itself, like a lizard's tail, in order to escape a predator.

It is a function seen with crabs removing their pincers, and the scorpion-like demon beast had done something similar.

The scorpion that the demon beast resembled was known for doing that, using the discarded limb as a lure to draw the attention of its enemy.

So it wasn't strange that autotomy might be used for another reason—even being used as a mine that can sense the approach of its prey and then tear it apart.

—A burning pain assaulted his arms and legs.

"Ugh…ghh…"

Groaning miserably, Subaru was covered in blood as he dragged his legs.

—No, there was something else, too.

"…It's enough. Leave me and go."

It was Echidna who was limply being dragged by Subaru even as he dragged his legs behind him. He had his arms wrapped around her sides, pulling her down the passage.

He worked frantically, trying to get as far away as possible from the demon beast that had left them that present.

"—Damn it, damn it, damn it!"

I let my guard down. I was careless. I wasn't thinking at all.

What Beatrice had said had given him such hope and, in her own way, Echidna had decided to give him a pass, even if only temporarily. That was why he'd let his guard down, only for this to happen.

Pathetic. So pathetic it makes me want to cry.

Why do I have to endure so much adversity? Am I just incapable of growing? Can I not change? Adversity, hardship, trials and tribulations, aren't those supposed to be opportunities the gods give for people to grow?

Because if adversity only existed in order to pummel people, to make them bleed and break their bones, to crush their souls, and to steal their lives, then why did people have to suffer?

"Natsu…ki…it's…enough…"

"It's not enough! It's not enough at all!"

"…Shouldn't it be…Beatrice over…me?"

Subaru caught his breath as Echidna slowly spoke, her eyes not opening.

There was a sad logic to what she was saying. If he had to say who was more important to him, Beatrice or Echidna, then sad as it was, he would pick Beatrice.

—But Beatrice was no longer there. She was gone. She'd been lost.

Because in the moment it exploded, Beatrice had been in his arms. She'd instantly shifted into a position that protected his chest and head.

"…I…see. She really was…an unfortunate girl."

Subaru said nothing when Echidna recognized what his silence meant.

He hadn't had any chance to say anything to her when she disappeared as if melting away. But he could remember the last look on her face.

It was a look of relief, of affection for Subaru. Nothing more than that.

"______"

In her final moment, Beatrice wore an expression that was far too convenient for Subaru.

Because she was the last one left by process of elimination, he had dragged Echidna away while cursing «Natsuki Subaru». Wishing «Natsuki Subaru» would disappear from the world without a trace for making Beatrice look like that as she vanished.

As if in atonement, for redemption, like a criminal who wanted punishment.

Echidna stopped him, though, as she struggled to breathe, saying it was pointless. Even though she'd been so worked up about returning Anastasia's body to her.

But that was only natural. Because both of her legs had been blown off.

"______"

There was already hardly any blood flowing.

Dragging the body that was even lighter than Beatrice had been, he hadn't really done any first aid, so what sort of future could possibly await her?

"Oww… Ahh, it hurts. A human body…really does…hurt…"

"Sorry, I'm sorry… No, I didn't mean to…I was…"

"Don't apologize…like that Natsuki. Besides…I'm too ashamed to ever see Ana… But this pain is…my only way of repaying her."

"Repaying…?"

It sounded so out of place, Subaru blinked, struggling to understand it. The corners of Echidna's lips softened.

"Isn't it obvious? If I gave her…body back now…she would hurt so bad…she would have to experience…the fear of dying… This is…hell. My feeling it…is enough.”

“Agh…”

“I couldn’t get Ana’s body back. I couldn’t help Julius… Slipping into hell like this is…just right for me.”

The scorn and self-reproach she quietly endured mercilessly was heartrending.

Her lifeless eyes made it clear that death was slowly drawing near. Subaru was overwhelmed with the feeling of powerlessness as he watched her life slip away.

Dumb and incompetent, powerless and reckless, he could do nothing but watch the lives lost in payment for that.

Echidna was dying, regretting her powerlessness. Dying and leaving Subaru behind.

“Don’t feel like you…have to…ease it… I’m…yeah… I’m fine with this…”

“———”

As her consciousness faded, her words made a new possibility take root in Subaru. —Make it easier. That was the only thing he could do for her as death drew near.

“Hey, did you hear that? That’s what you call a godsend, right?”

The girl peeked in at Subaru, who stood beside Echidna as she continued breathing so weakly. She was smiling in rapture at the excuse Subaru had been given.

“———”

Moving his aching body, Subaru picked up a fragment of rock from the crumbled wall, about the size of his fist. It was unreliably light, but it was enough to crack the skull of a girl who was already on the verge of death.

“This is just putting her out of her misery, mister.”

It was a worthy request, to allow someone an easier death for their sake. Life was precious and irreplaceable. So the only time there was any right to take someone’s life was when that request was genuine.

This was the one and only opportunity for Subaru, who hadn’t been able to do anything, to make amends.

His one chance, and yet…

“———”

His hands were trembling. There was a pain in the corner of his eyes, and he gasped weakly for air.

Raise his hand, and lower. It was such a simple movement, but he couldn’t do it. His body wouldn’t move, as if he’d forgotten how.

“…Ah…”

There was a hoarse gasp as the rubble dropped to the floor with a thud.

His legs went weak, and Subaru slumped to the ground.

"…I…"

Can you not even do something that simple, Natsuki Subaru?

It's just putting her out of her misery when she's in so much pain. Can you not even do that much?

All that talk about atoning, the expedient feelings of guilt. Or if it isn't just expedience, then what is this?

"…Natsuki…"

"I…"

"You can't even…raise a rock…to end the misery…?"

She weakly opened her lifeless eyes, seeing Subaru kneeling there beside her. He held his breath, expecting a rebuke for how pathetic he was.

But as he flinched in anticipation, Echidna's lips softened.

"…Sorry…for doubting you…"

She apologized with her last breath.

Echidna apologized. She apologized for doubting Natsuki Subaru.

—And before he could ask what she meant, she died.

He'd killed Meili, hidden her body, pretended to not have lost his memories, told lie after lie, betrayed the vow he'd been entrusted with, let the girl who had tried to save his heart die, couldn't even dirty his hands for the woman who was in her last moments, and was now just pitying himself. And it was Echidna who had apologized to Subaru and then died.

"Do you want to die?"

It went without saying that he wanted to die.

He wanted to die and forget everything that had happened.

He wanted everyone in the world to point at him and say Natsuki Subaru deserved to die. Natsuki Subaru despaired of himself, believing he had committed crimes worthy of that punishment.

He despaired.

6

—The world was becoming shrouded in darkness.

“———”

As Subaru slumped down, countless black hands reached out toward him. The dark, evil influence was obvious.

Those spiraling hands seized Natsuki Subaru’s soul, trying to melt into him. He could feel his being gradually growing hollow, but strangely, it wasn’t an entirely bad feeling.

—His soul was being corrupted, his very being overwritten.

Experiencing that ultimate desecration of life, Subaru’s heart grew tranquil. Because none other than Natsuki Subaru had committed that desecration first.

He’d ended up like that as a result of corrupting «Natsuki Subaru’s» soul and overwriting his existence.

“———”

I want to die. Disappear. Be wiped out and destroyed, lose all form.

If I come back, then turn this body into ash and erase it, as many times as it takes.

—I love you.

As Subaru wished for death, the evil influence that brought the end whispered love. Even if he covered his ears, closed his heart, those dark fingers would slip through the gaps of his closed heart and force their way in.

—I love you. I love you. I love you.

Stop it already. Her resentment was far better than this.

Repeat it all you want, it doesn’t matter. I don’t. I don’t love myself. I knew I was loved. I knew it. I knew already.

My parents. My mom and dad both loved me from the bottom of their hearts.

I knew. There was no way I couldn’t know. That was why I disappeared.

Even though my parents loved me, there was no reason they should love someone so unworthy of love as I am.

—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.

Stop it already, please stop. It’s enough already.

I already reached my answer a long time ago. I knew. I knew. I knew, I just didn’t acknowledge it. I just pretended not to see it.

There is no way all those people who were so desperately, so earnestly worried about me were really bad people.

I knew it. There was no way I couldn’t. So I should just die.

I should have tried not to stand in the light of all those people *surrounding me with so much mercy.*

If I endure this torture, will my plea be heard? Drink me, break me, crush me, banish me to the great beyond, so I never have to face anyone else ever again.

If so…if so, I'll accept it. I want to accept it. If this can be the end.

If this can be the end, if Natsuki Subaru can disappear—

—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you.

"—That's enough."

I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you…

There was a voice.

An unending confession of love whispering in his ears.

And a sharp, silvery voice ringing out through the torrent of love blotting out Natsuki Subaru and the entire world.

"———"

There was a flash of light.

It pierced the evil influence melting Subaru away. The hand hit by the light was blown away. But it was one shadow among countless.

There was nothing to be gained by removing one hand out of the thousands to make up for earning the hostility of the massive swarm of shadows. But the voice that had unleashed that attack bravely advanced, pushing forward, evading, dodging, slipping past the swarming hands with an extraordinary composure.

And—

"—Subaru!"

The voice forcefully grabbed Subaru's hand.

His body was lifted up and forcibly carried away from there. Emilia was looking straight ahead without wavering, her long, shimmering silver hair fluttering behind her as she ran.

He had confirmed she was still alive. But his heart didn't swell. Obviously.

He had already let Julius, Beatrice, and Echidna die.

Natsuki Subaru was an angel of death. He might avoid death himself, but the bill still came due, and the people around him were the ones who had to pay the price.

If someone told him that that was his fate, he would have believed it.

"…It's…enough…"

"Eh?"

"I'm saying there's no point struggling anymore."

He stopped his legs, fighting against Emilia as she pulled his arm. She was trying to lead him away, but this time he refused to follow.

"———"

The two of them stood face-to-face, looking at each other.

As the world came to an end consumed by darkness, Subaru glared at Emilia.

"Why are you trying to save me? It doesn't make any sense. You think I'm a fake, right? That's why you locked me into that ice cage and tried to kill me."

He twisted reality, insultingly and unfairly berating Emilia to wound her as deeply as he could. So that she would never again think to try to take his hand.

But despite his efforts, it wouldn't work on Emilia, who was so blindingly earnest.

"I would never try to kill you! I just wanted to hear from you what was really happening. And you told me. That you forgot everything. So—"

"That! That could obviously be an excuse! How can you believe it so easily?! It's insane. What's wrong with you?! You and Julius and Beatrice!"

He'd told the truth about his amnesia while he was trapped in the cage of ice, even though it sounded like pathetic pleading to live. But anyone with half a brain wouldn't blindly accept that. Ram and Echidna had it right. And yet more than half of their party were complete idiots.

"No…they all are! At the very end…in that state, at the very end, even Echidna apologized to me… It doesn't…it doesn't make any sense."

"The very…end…? What happened, Subaru? Are they—"

"They're dead! Echidna's dead! Both of her legs blown off, bleeding out, in miserable pain… It was an awful death! And Beatrice, too!"

"—!"

"She protected me, too… Autotomy, what a shitty ability… If only I had noticed. But because I couldn't, she died. Saying she wouldn't forget me…"

That even if I forgot, she wouldn't.

She had so reassuringly sworn to get back Subaru's memories.

But he had lost her. That was the last thing she said to him.

That's what you call talking a big game. Putting some grand hope into words and then…

She had kept death at bay from Subaru, looked relieved, and then disappeared from the world.

"If she had to disappear like that…it would have been better not to…carry her away? Whatever. Doesn't matter. If I took her from someplace else…someplace not here, then it would have been better not to. At least then…"

She wouldn't have had to disappear while looking like that.

"Julius, too. I'm sure by now he's already…with all those crazy demon beasts, and Reid even getting in the way…telling me to go…entrusting me… How stupid."

They're all idiots. What are they expecting?

Entrusting, recovering, apologizing for doubting me, what are they talking about?

What happens after entrusting something? What meaning is there in recovering my memories? Isn't it normal to doubt me?

Natsuki Subaru was there because he betrayed everything he was given.

The only one alive and unharmed, give or take, and wishing he could disappear because that fact was so unbearable.

The dumbest, most foolish, most hopeless, unsalvageable one of all—

If that isn't Natsuki Subaru, then…

"—The first time I met you was the stolen goods storehouse, in the capital."

—.

——.

———.

"———"

Subaru was stuck in a bottomless morass of self-doubt and self-reproach when Emilia's words echoed in his ears. It was a voice recalling nostalgic, dear memories.

"…Ha…"

That hoarse rasp wasn't a derisive laugh that mocked her random statement. Subaru's mind hadn't followed that far. He was just genuinely bewildered.

Ignoring his reaction, Emilia started counting on her fingers, going back through her memories.

"Felt had stolen something *really* important from me. Puck and I were all flustered trying to get it back… And after tracking it down, we ended up fighting with Meili's big sister. It was dangerous, but Reinhart helped us. Then, right when I was relieved, Meili's sister aimed for me…and that was when you saved me."

"———"

"That was the first time I met you… Do you remember that?"

Subaru shook his head.

She had included all sorts of details, but not a single piece of it meant anything to him.

Of course not. It's her memory of «Natsuki Subaru». A fragment of memory spun by «Natsuki Subaru's» unimaginable string of actions…

"But because you protected me, you were badly injured, so we brought you back to Roswaal's manor with us. Beatrice complained, but she healed you, and you became friends with Ram…and I'm sure with Rem, too."

"———"

"And then instead of her big sister, Meili sent demon beasts to cause trouble. You and Ram held them back, Roswaal took care of the demon beasts, and I was watching over the manor… That was when I promised to go on a date with you… Do you remember that?"

"———"

He shook his head again.

I don't remember. I didn't do that. I didn't do anything like that.

"There were a lot of things that happened at the manor. Making mayonnaise, drinking with everyone, Puck making it snow, playing the king's game…and then I was summoned to the capital for the royal selection."

"———"

"That was when we had our first big fight. I didn't want you to push yourself so hard and hurt yourself anymore, and I didn't understand why you were being so nice to me, so I was scared. I was worried it would all end when we had our fight…"

There was a faint quiver in Emilia's voice as she continued.

The joy and sadness, the unease and expectation, all of it mixed together, hitting Subaru with a feeling that made his mouth dry.

It was burning. There was a white-hot blaze scorching his chest.

Burning from the thing that had made Emilia look how she did in that moment.

"When I didn't know what was happening, just getting dragged along in the flow of a scary situation, when my heart was most on edge, you came rushing to me, and…"

"———"

"Do you remember what you said to me there?"

"I…"

—I don't remember.

It won't come. It can't come.

Her trembling voice, the way she said his name, the pleading tone made it clear.

The Subaru there now was not the «Natsuki Subaru» she wanted.

Hit by the reality he already knew, his soul burned with envy and jealousy.

Why is it you, «Natsuki Subaru»?

What's so different about us?

Emilia is thinking it. They're all thinking it.

—Bring back the real «Natsuki Subaru».

—You should just die, fake Natsuki Subaru.

Even though they should be thinking it, feeling it, lamenting it: how much better it would have been if you were here instead of me.

And yet…

"—But I remember it all. What you said. What you did. What you promised. All of it."

Her smile was filled with joy and expectation, as if the sadness and unease had never happened. And seeing that smile, Subaru's lips quivered.

There's…nothing…anywhere.

What was said, what was done, what was promised. None of it.

I can't find any of it inside me. Not in my head, not in my heart, not in my soul.

So…

"I don't…remember. I can't remember it. You…you! All of you! Who are you talking about?!"

Emilia's purple eyes widened.

Watching her, Subaru blinked away the hot droplets welling up in his eyes and bellowed with the most vulgar malice he could manage.

"Risking my life for someone else! Reflexively saving someone else! Running around trying so hard for someone else! Risking my life for someone else in order to achieve something! In what world?! You expect me to believe that?!"

When asked if he could remember, he answered in the negative.

Beatrice had disappeared before he could answer her, and he still couldn't get over the regret he felt for that when Emilia so gently started talking about her memories, trying to persuade him.

Who Julius entrusted, who Beatrice believed in, who Echidna forgave, who Emilia wished for.

It's «Natsuki Subaru». The real one who was summoned into this world —

"—It's all a big joke! There's no way that guy is Natsuki Subaru!"

Natsuki Subaru isn't someone to be entrusted with anyone's hope.

"I know! I know just how pathetic, how garbage, how hopeless, how rotten Natsuki Subaru really is!"

You think Natsuki Subaru is someone anyone would trust?

"Who are you seeing?! What are you even talking about?! That guy doesn't exist! It's all a lie! What you saw in him, what he said, every last bit of it! Just bullshit in order to get through the moment! None of it is worth trusting!"

As if anyone would ever forgive Natsuki Subaru his sins.

"Natsuki Subaru isn't worthy of that! Natsuki Subaru is trash! Just a worthless piece of shit! I know that better than anyone!”

As if anyone would ever want to be together with Natsuki Subaru.

“———”

He isn’t worth that. He doesn’t have any worth.

Subaru Natsuki is a plague vector. Everyone he’s with gets hurt, is lost, dies.

So just stop.

There’s no reason for any of you to be hurt for his sake.

There’s no need to be hurt. So…

“…It doesn’t have to be me.”

That was the unvarnished truth of what Subaru felt.

“———”

It would be better without him—without Natsuki Subaru.

Why entrust something to a guy who couldn’t do anything? Why trust him? Why forgive him? Why plead with him?

There has to be a better way. There must be someone who could do it better.

And if that person is the «Natsuki Subaru» they all hoped for, then he’s already gone.

He was never there. It was a bluff. An act. An impossible illusion.

«Natsuki Subaru» isn’t some hypothetical version of me, he’s a dream.

“So just ignore me. Forget about me. Get someone stronger or smarter instead. I…I…”

I can’t.

A feeling of powerlessness consumed Natsuki Subaru.

People have limits. Capabilities. You need to understand. I’m not worthy of walking beside you. I’m not worthy of your hopes.

I’m not strong, I’m not smart. You don’t have to put your hopes in me. So…

“—My name is Emilia. Just Emilia.”

“—Huh?”

After venting his powerlessness, still feeling empty, he was caught off guard.

“———”

He didn’t understand the meaning—no, not the meaning, the intent of what she was saying.

Looking up, his eyes focused on Emilia. She put her hand on her breast, and Subaru could see himself reflected in her big, round, purple eyes.

“———”

He gulped seeing her shining eyes. Those earnest eyes transformed the memories filling her heart into strength…

“There are lots of things I have to say, and lots of things I have to hear. Lots and lots of them. But right now, let me hear one thing.”

"______"

"The person who Julius trusted, who Beatrice believed in, who Echidna forgave, and whose hand I just took, who I ran with, who I want to protect no matter what, who I don't want to let die…"

Emilia closed her eyes, channeling a multitude of emotions.

She was silent for a few seconds. It was clear that all sorts of feelings were swelling in her heart in that brief interlude. And her concern for all of her comrades who weren't there, too.

With all of those feelings, Emilia's pink lips trembled.

"You, who made us all feel that way, who are you?"

"______"

"Please. Let me hear your name."

His heart shuddered deep in his chest.

It was not a rejection of the Natsuki Subaru standing before her, not a desire to reclaim the past Subaru.

It was an affirmation of him.

"______"

It would have been so much better if she called him a fake, if she pleaded with him to bring back the real Natsuki Subaru, if she'd cursed him.

That was what Subaru wanted to hear.

He wanted to be rejected because he couldn't be the «Natsuki Subaru» they wanted. Since he was the one who had already wished to be erased, to no longer exist.

But she didn't think that. And she wasn't alone.

Every single person who had spoken to Natsuki Subaru up until that moment, they all had the same wish.

Strong or weak. Even after forgetting everything, in such a pathetic and disgraceful state, it didn't change anything. They all showed in their attitude, in their words, in their actions that they needed Natsuki Subaru—

"…Why…?"

"______"

"Why Natsuki Subaru, why here of all places? What can he do? What do you expect from him…"

It didn't make any sense.

In this hopeless situation, in this terrible state, how would Natsuki Subaru being there help at all? How would things change for the better? How would they overcome this?

How could they pin their hopes on Natsuki Subaru, a guy who betrayed every and any expectations?

"What can that weak, stupid, pathetic, spineless guy do?"

"—You might be right."

Emilia averted her eyes as Subaru shook his head, not so much in denial, but in a plea.

Her purple eyes rimmed by long eyelashes, her silvery voice that tickled his heart. Everything about her was tying Natsuki Subaru to this world.

The urge to just disappear and die was being destroyed by his desire to know the answer she was building up to. It was like a linchpin. Emilia was the anchor tying Subaru to this world.

"There are people stronger than you, and I'm sure there are lots of people smarter, too. But no matter when or where, I would rather have you with me. I believe you would be there for me. And that's what I want. After all…"

"——"

"If I'm going to be saved, then I don't care about who's capable, or who happened to be in the right place at the right time, or who wants to help me… What matters is that it's the person I love."

She smiled as she said that. Smiled as her cheeks flushed ever so slightly redder.

"—"

Subaru exhaled.

He could feel his heart racing. But at the same time, there was a scornful laugh for «Natsuki Subaru» in the back of his head.

"—Ha."

I get it. I understand it painfully, stupidly well.

The bottomless font of power that «Natsuki Subaru» had but Natsuki Subaru did not. He finally understood what that was and he laughed.

—So that's it, «Natsuki Subaru». You were head over heels for a cute girl.

"——"

Once he understood it, he also immediately understood what a stupid reason it was. It was hard to believe, hard to accept, and hard to forgive.

There's gotta be a limit to not knowing your place. You really thought you could get her?

That cool knight, that wise woman, that adorable little girl, and this beautiful girl.

Trusting you, believing you, forgiving you, pleading for you.

Not wanting to be saved, not clinging to hope, but striving to overcome the walls in front of them. Wanting you instead of just anyone who can get them over the wall.

How the hell did you become the sort of person they would think that way about?

"—My name is Emilia. Just Emilia."

Emilia introduced herself one more time.

Her purple eyes were looking at him. And Subaru met them head on with his black eyes.

"—Please, tell me your name."

"______"

He hesitated.

All the rejections piled up inside him.

I can't do that. I can't be that. I'm not that.

All of this was just a convenient play on words. Semantics.

—Trusted, believed in, forgiven, wished for.

In this desert tower, if I really do deserve all that…

In this desert tower, if there is someone who could save them…

If that is «Natsuki Subaru», and if «Natsuki Subaru» is nowhere to be found, then…

"…My name is Natsuki Subaru."

"______"

"The one Julius relies on, the one Beatrice believes in, the one Echidna forgave, and the one you, Emilia, wishes for… If that man's name is Natsuki Subaru, then…"

The black-haired boy stared into the silver-haired girl's purple eyes with his black eyes and answered with a mouth darkened by dried blood.

"…I'm Natsuki Subaru."

—I may be weak and powerless right now, body and mind hollowed out by despair, but this is my declaration.

I hope and pray that Emilia, that all of them will be safe, will be at peace.

That is the most I can do to repay—no, it isn't anything so admirable as repayment—this is my pathetic plea, what Natsuki Subaru can do for the people who trusted him, believed in him, forgave him, and wished for him.

I want them to be saved. And I'll stake my everything for that.

"______"

He forcefully declared that he was Natsuki Subaru.

But the suspicion he felt toward «Natsuki Subaru» deep in his heart hadn't cleared at all.

The face and voice of the evil man who had killed a part of him, who had killed «her»—Meili, was still burned into his insides. And that might never be exorcised.

But that's fine. It's okay.

I don't want to be saved. I won't beg to be saved and I won't cling to *them.*

I just want them to be saved.

I want to help them.

—If «Natsuki Subaru» could do that, then I'll do it.

If this is my opportunity to start, then I pray that the me who sets out on this path is the same who reaches the end.

And if the path you imagined is the same, «Natsuki Subaru», then we're in the same boat. I hate you, but I won't complain. Even if we can't stand each other's faces, let's deal with it and get through this. So, I'm begging you. Let me save them.

"Thank you, Emilia. For feeling that way about me."

"…Subaru, I…"

There was a ripple in Emilia's purple eyes.

A change in emotion, a shift in the balance of joy and sadness. And not wanting to know how it shifted, Subaru looked down, even though he knew it was pathetic.

Just as he was wondering what she would say—

"—Ngh!"

The world that had been so silent, as if not wanting to interrupt their conversation, suddenly shattered.

"—Emilia!"

The passage they were talking in was crushed by a massive shadow in the blink of an eye. The floor lost its shape, and without anywhere to stand, Emilia's balance crumbled. Subaru still barely had a little footing, but he kicked off what little floor remained and reached out for Emilia.

In an instant, the tower shattered, turning into a pile of rubble filled with old stone and sand.

"———"

Subaru desperately chased Emilia as she fell, closing the distance, catching up to her fluttering silver hair, and finally holding her slender body close.

"Subaru…"

Emilia twisted as he hugged her soft, warm body. Most likely trying to adjust her position to cushion him in the fall.

But that was mixing up who was saving whom.

What is with all of you? But unfortunately, that thought isn't going to be much help here.

Emilia couldn't know since she had twisted to fall with her back to the ground. But they were not falling toward the hard floor of the tower or out into sandy desert. They were falling into the black shadow that was consuming the tower and guiding everything toward destruction.

"———"

There was no way to resist. In each other's arms, they would be swallowed up in the shadow, and that would be the end.

—But it's not the end. This is it. This is where it all begins.

What I started before, I'll continue from this ending.

So this is a promise.

I'll make the words spoken here in this world true.

My hopes that they would be saved, my wish to save them.

I'll start again from this ending with all of that. I'm done smoldering here.

A curse-like attachment? Bring it on.

—I don't know if Natsuki Subaru is worthy of being loved.

—But Emilia and the rest of them definitely are.

"———"

Even if you can't remember, even if you forget what you said to me.

Even if you can't remember, even if you forget all the words I flung at you in this dying world, in this starting world.

I remember.

I'll remember it all.

This time, I won't forget. No matter what. No matter what happens, I won't forget. Even if I die, I will never lose these memories.

"Even if you forget…I will never forget you."

—Don't you dare forget, Natsuki Subaru.

The shadow closed in, swallowing Subaru and Emilia in darkness.

He clasped her tightly, not wanting to lose her warmth until the very end.

Natsuki Subaru and Emilia sank into the depths of the shadow like that.

Everything was lost, returned to zero, and then the end finally came.

And out of that zero came a beginning.

—The start of the battle to kill Natsuki Subaru and reclaim the real «Natsuki Subaru».

<END>

AFTERWORD

Hello! It's Tappei Nagatsuki, the mouse-colored cat in that familiar, nigh-illegible fine print!

In the last book, the afterword was a normal font size for the first time in a long time, but we meet like this again due to a mix-up in page distribution on my part. Be sure to squint!

With that, thank you for joining me in the twenty-third volume of the main series! Picking up with the developments at the end of last book, we have a fresh Natsuki Subaru! He's gotten pretty tough lately with all the different trials and adversities he's endured, so this is a bit of a return to the story's roots.

This is the real *Re:ZERO*!

It left me feeling almost kind of villainous, but an author always goes to the limit so their readers can enjoy the story!

So Subaru's wails and lamentations are really a collaboration between author and readers!

With that little bit of twisted logic to share the guilt, we've reached the limit of the page's width, so allow me to move onto the customary thanks!

To my editor, I—even with the continued difficult state of things in the world—thank you for working with me to move this forward while we both worked from home. It's been a few months now without seeing you, but whenever we meet again, I pray your hair hasn't stopped being red like last time!

To the illustrator Otsuka, seeing Reid on the cover was especially impactful! Thank you very much. It doesn't show in the background of the story, so the Reid on the cover is an illustration of him at his peak. Him sitting on a dragon really hits hard. Just a perfect encapsulation of Reid.

To the designer Kusano, thank you so much for taking such a fiery image of Reid and trimming it down to its awesome essence! That initial impact is everything to Reid, so thank you for really bringing him to life!

On the comicalization front, Atori and Aikawa's manga adaptation of the fourth arc and Nozaki's *Ballad of the Sword Devil* are both being published in *Gekkan Comic Alive*! Also Minori Tsukahara's *The Frozen Bond* has begun in Manga UP! They are all drawing powerful and brilliant stories, so everyone please check them out as well!

And to everyone else at MF Bunko J's editorial division, all of the proofreaders, and all of the bookstores, thank you very much for all of your work. I'll be in your care next time as well!

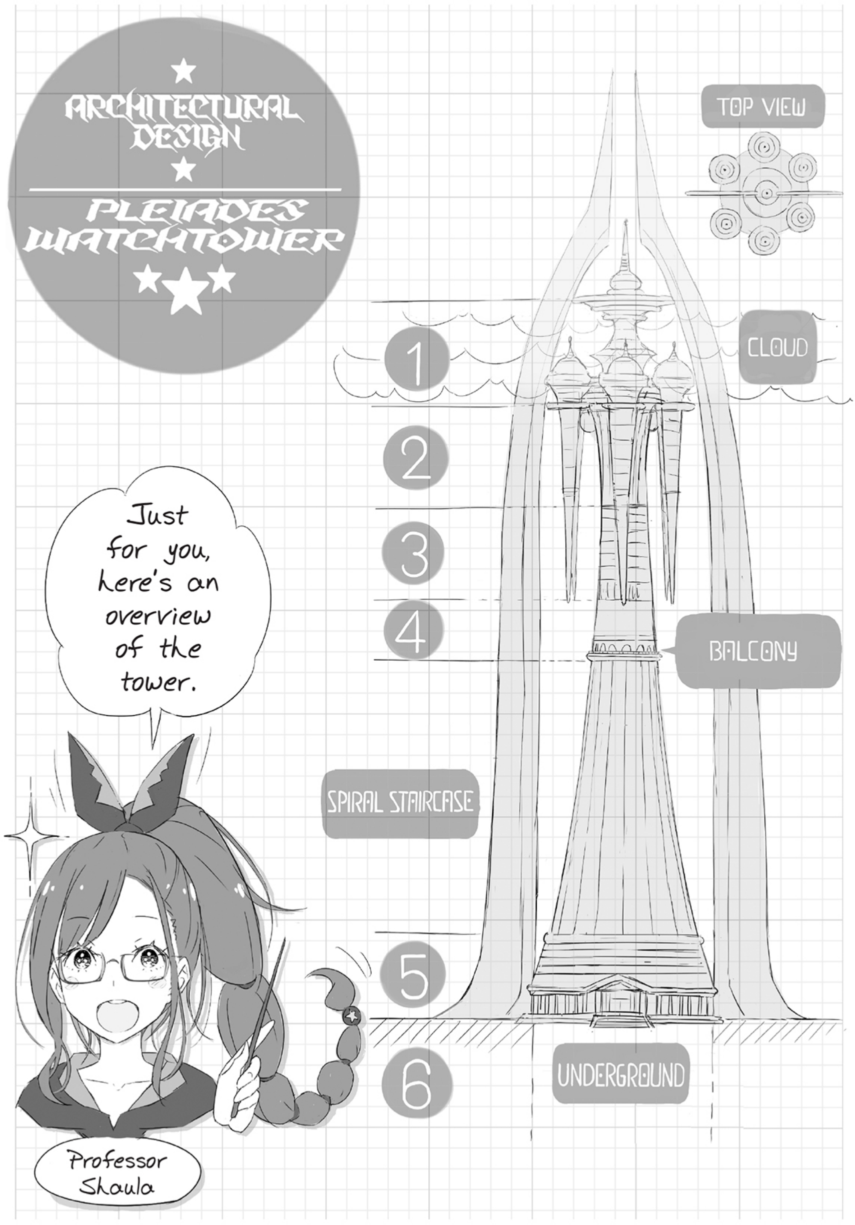
And finally, my deepest gratitude to all the readers who continue to support this series.

The second series of the anime that was hit by a delay is! This time for sure! About to air! During the stay-at-home period, be sure to rewatch the first series or reread the novels and get ready for it. Get hyped for it!

Please follow closely the story to come and the story unfolding in the anime! Thank you! And let's meet in the next volume!

May 2020

< <*Heart racing in anticipation—*> >


ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN
PLEIADES WATCHTOWER
TOP VIEW
CLOUD
1
2
3
4
BALCONY
SPIRAL STAIRCASE
5
6
UNDERGROUND
Just for you, here's an overview of the tower.
Professor Shaula

Jul
Reid
Julius
Reid

“Thank you kindly for joining us in this, the twenty-third volume. This is the place where we would normally discuss various things regarding this series and make announcements about future plans, but…”

“Whoa there, don’t go draggin’ me out for a pain-in-the-ass job like this, you bastard. And you doing somethin’ with me? You got a hard-on for pain or somethin’? Give me a break. At this rate, I’ll become a real damn bully.

“As it so happens, I have no such interests. Previous interactions aside, it is fair to say you and I are enemies. Allow me to simply finish the announcements.”

“Heh, do what you want. I ain’t gonna do any work, though.”

“That goes without saying. First of all, news regarding the main series: This coming July, the sixth collection of short stories will be released. Volume 24, the continuation of this book, is planned for publication in September.”

“This kid’s in such a rush to get through life. Try takin’ it a bit easier. Or can weaklings just not afford that? I can’t get how weaklings tick.”

“I’m afraid I cannot allow that comment to pass unremarked. The second series of the anime that is confirmed to be airing in July will disprove that preconception handily.”

“It’s just the story of how the small fry learned how to swim, right? If he’s still a small fry after all that growth, then is he just an egg in the anime? I ain’t gonna wait around to see when he’s born.”

“In addition! There is a *Re:ZERO* game, *The Prophecy of the Throne*, that is already on sale. It is an original story with character designs by Shinichirou Otsuka and was developed under the supervision of the author Tappei Nagatsuki.”

“A branch off the first anime, right? You’re gettin’ all excited about that royal selection nonsense, but what’s it really matter who’s at the top? Your head’s still on your shoulders, ain’t it?”

“Ngh…”

“Main series, anime, game… I guess it’s fine as long as that small fry doesn’t die from swimmin’ too hard. Not that it really matters to me either way, gah-ha-ha!”

“How much must you trifle—”

“The second volume of the fourth arc’s manga adaptation is also goin’ on sale in June. Whoops, I said I didn’t feel like workin’, but it just slipped out.”

“You…! What is going through that head of yours?! Not just here, either, but during the examination and during the mess inside the tower as well!”

“If you really wanna know, then you’re just gonna have to make me talk, aren’t ya? If you can!”

“I…I…”

“You ain’t gonna get what you want outta me like that. You and everyone else can’t do anything ’cause you’re weak. There’s no helpin’ you.”

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TAPPEI
NAGATSUKI

ILLUSTRATION BY
SHINICHIROU
OTSUKA

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Re:ZeRo

-Starting Life in Another World-